

The Rise of Wokeness in the Military

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COMMENTARY BY



An Army master sergeant provides security during a live-fire exercise near Tbilisi, Georgia on August 4, 2019. U.S. Army photo by Army Sgt. LaShic Patterson

Key Takeaways

Precious time and money are being poured into woke programs and projects that would be better applied towards making the military more capable.

The American military remains a faithful and loyal servant of the republic. Most Americans are still proud and trusting of our military.

But this trust and support cannot be taken for granted.

The following is adapted from a talk delivered on July 20, 2022, at the Allan P. Kirby, Jr. Center for Constitutional Studies and Citizenship on Hillsdale's Washington, D.C. campus, as part of the AWC Family Foundation Lecture Series.

Complaints by veteran soldiers about younger generations who lack discipline and traditional values are as old as war itself. Grizzled veterans in the Greek phalanx, Roman legions, and Napoleon's elite corps all believed that the failings of the young would be the ruin of their armies. This is not the chief worry of grizzled American veterans today. The largest threat they see by far to our current military is the weakening of its fabric by radical progressive (or "woke") policies being imposed, not by a rising generation of slackers, but by the very leaders charged with ensuring their readiness.

Wokeness in the military is being imposed by elected and appointed leaders in the White House, Congress, and the Pentagon who have little understanding of the purpose, character, traditions, and requirements of the institution they are trying to change. The push for it didn't begin in the last two years under the Biden administration—nor will it automatically end if a non-woke administration is elected in 2024. Wokeness in the military has become ingrained. And unless the policies that flow from it are illegal or *directly* jeopardize readiness, senior military leaders have little alternative but to comply.

Woke ideology undermines military readiness in various ways. It undermines cohesiveness by emphasizing differences based on race, ethnicity, and sex. It undermines leadership authority by introducing questions about whether promotion is based on merit or quota requirements. It leads to military personnel serving in specialties and areas for which they are not qualified or ready. And it takes time and resources away from training activities and weapons development that contribute to readiness.

Wokeness in the military also affects relations between the military and society at large. It acts as a disincentive for many young Americans in terms of enlistment. And it undermines wholehearted support for the military by a significant portion of the American public at a time when it is needed the most.

Let me give some examples of what I mean by wokeness.

In 2015, then Secretary of the Navy Ray Mabus rejected out-of-hand a Marine Corps study concluding that gender-integrated combat formations did not move as quickly or shoot as accurately, and that women were twice as likely as men to suffer combat injuries. He rejected it because it did not comport with the Obama administration's political agenda.

That same year the Department of Defense opened all combat jobs in the U.S. military to women, and Secretary of Defense Ashton Carter committed to “gender-neutral standards” to ensure that female servicemembers could meet the demanding rigors involved in qualifying for combat. Since then, the Army has been working for a decade to put in place the gender-neutral test promised by Carter. But after finding that women were not scoring as highly as men, and under fierce pressure from advocacy groups, the Army threw out the test. Now there is no test to determine whether *any* soldier can meet the fitness requirements for combat specialties.

In 2015, near the end of his second term, President Obama initiated a change to the Pentagon’s longstanding policy on transgender individuals in the military. Before that change could take effect, the incoming Trump administration put it on hold awaiting future study. Subsequent evidence presented to Secretary of Defense James Mattis—including the fact that transgender individuals suffering from gender dysphoria attempt suicide and experience severe anxiety at nine times the rate of the general population—raised legitimate concerns about their fitness for military service.

This led the Trump administration to impose reasonable restrictions on military service by those suffering gender dysphoria. But only hours after his inauguration in January 2021, President Biden signed an executive order that did away with these restrictions and opened military service to all transgender individuals. Since then, the Biden administration has decreed that active members of the military can take time off from their duties to obtain sex-change surgeries and all related hormones and drugs at taxpayer expense.

Along similar lines, the Biden administration has recently ended support for a longstanding policy prohibiting individuals infected with HIV from serving in combat zones. The policy had been based on sound science tied to the need for HIV medications and the danger of cross-infection through shared blood.

Physical fitness has long been a hallmark of the U.S. military. But in recent years, fitness standards have been progressively watered down in pursuit of the woke goal of “leveling the playing field.” The Army, for instance, recently lowered its minimum passing standards for pushups to an unimpressive total of ten and increased its minimum two-mile run time from 19 to 23 minutes. The new Space Force is considering doing away with periodic fitness testing altogether.

Back in 2016, Navy Secretary Mabus decreed that Navy sailors would no longer be known by traditional job titles such as “corpsman,” adopting instead new gender-neutral titles such as “medical technician.” The resulting blowback was so severe from enlisted sailors who cherished those historic titles that the Navy was forced to reverse the changes. But wokeness has a way of coming back, and last year the Navy released a training video to help sailors understand the proper way of using personal pronouns—a skill Americans have traditionally

mastered in grade school. The video instructs servicemembers that they need to create a “safe space for everybody” by using “inclusive language”—for instance, saying “hey everybody” instead of “hey guys.” Can the return of gender-neutral job titles be far behind?

Much of the emphasis of wokeness today is on promoting the idea that America is fatally flawed by systemic racism and white privilege. Our fighting men and women are required to sit through indoctrination programs, often with roots in the Marxist tenets of critical race theory, either by Pentagon diktat or through carelessness by senior leaders who delegate their command responsibilities to private Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion instructors.

These indoctrination programs differentiate servicemembers along racial and gender lines, which runs completely counter to the military imperative to build cohesiveness based on common loyalties, training, and standards. Traditional training and education programs used to combat racial and sex discrimination have been supplanted by programs that *promote* discrimination by replacing the American ideal of equality with the progressive ideal of equity—which in practice means unequal treatment based on group identity.

The Biden administration’s Chief of Naval Operations, Admiral Michael Gilday, decided last year to add Ibram X. Kendi’s book, *How to Be an Antiracist*—one of the leading sourcebooks on critical race theory—to his list of recommended readings. To give an idea of how radical Kendi’s book is, one of its famous (or infamous) arguments is that “Capitalism is essentially racist,” and that “to truly be antiracist, you also have to be truly anticapitalist.”

Last year, Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin told the House Armed Services Committee, “We do not teach critical race theory, we don’t embrace critical race theory, and I think that’s a spurious conversation.” Despite repeated denials by Austin and others in the Pentagon that critical race theory is being taught in the military, there is no shortage of evidence to the contrary.

Indeed, last year a senior officer in the U.S. Space Force, Lt. Col. Matthew Lohmeier, was removed from command for publicly describing the role of critical race theory in indoctrinating servicemembers at his installation. And just this summer, multiple media outlets reported on training materials on the problems of “whiteness” obtained through Freedom of Information Act requests from the U.S. Military Academy at West Point. One training slide read: “In order to understand racial inequality and slavery, it is first necessary to address whiteness.”

Congressmen have obtained curricular materials from West Point showing lectures titled “Understanding Whiteness and White Rage” and classroom slides labeled “White Power at West Point.” When challenged about this, the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff General Mark Milley became defensive: “I wanna understand white rage, and I’m white,” he said. “I’ve read Mao Zedong. I’ve read Karl Marx. I’ve read Lenin. That doesn’t make me a communist.”

The rationale for reading communist writings in the service academies in the past has been that by doing so, we learned about our Soviet enemies at the time and how they thought. How is that analogous to reading Leftist tracts accusing white people (including servicemembers)—just by virtue of their being white—of racism?

Last year, Secretary Austin alarmingly called for a one-day military-wide stand-down to address the so-called problem of “extremism” in the ranks, despite the fact that there has been no evidence presented—including in testimony by senior officials—that there is a problem of extremism in the military. Commanding officers were required to discuss the topic using a PowerPoint presentation that included Ted Talks asking the question, “What is up with us white people?”

Since 2008, the Air Force has created at least eight “Barrier Analysis Working Groups” to “create an inclusive culture regardless of race, ethnicity, sex, orientation, religion, or disabilities.” These groups include the “Indigenous Nations Equality Team” and the “Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer, or Questioning Initiatives Team.” President Biden signed an executive order in 2021 requiring all organizations in the military—as well as in the rest of the federal government—to create Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) offices, to produce strategic DEI plans, and to create bureaucratic structures to report on progress towards DEI goals. The overall goal, Biden said, was “advancing equity for all”—again using the Left’s euphemism for achieving desired outcomes through discriminatory policies.

Wokeness also comes in the form of conflating the mission of the military with environmental ideology. A year ago, President Biden told a group of overseas Air Force airmen that the Joint Chiefs of Staff had determined that the greatest threat facing America was global warming—a claim the Joint Chiefs had to walk back. In the same vein, Biden signed an executive order imposing a massive regime of environmental goals and requirements for the Department of Defense. These goals included transitioning to all electric non-tactical vehicles by 2035, carbon-free electricity for military installations by that same year, and net zero emissions from those installations by 2050. As a result, the Pentagon recently announced it will devote over \$3 billion of its already stretched-thin military budget to climate-related initiatives *in 2023 alone*.

Although direct “cause and effect” studies on the impact of woke policies such as these do not exist, common sense suggests that the consequences for military readiness are dramatic. Spending billions on woke programs while the Chinese are outpacing us on hypersonic weapons, quantum computing, and other important military technologies is one piece of evidence. Recent reports showing the military’s dismal failure to gain new recruits in

adequate numbers is another. Is anyone surprised that potential recruits—many of whom come from rural or poor areas of the country—don't want to spend their time being lectured about white privilege?

These ideological policies move the military in a divergent direction from the American mainstream. In a recent poll of voters, for instance, 69 percent oppose the teaching of critical race theory in schools. Relatedly, Americans are increasingly losing confidence in the military. Between 2021 and 2022, the percentage of Americans who report a great deal or quite a lot of confidence in the military decreased five percentage points, from 69 to 64. In 2012, this confidence level stood at 75 percent.

The bottom line is that precious time and money are being poured into woke programs and projects that would be better applied towards making the military more capable. The billions of dollars that will be spent on Pentagon climate change programs, the time and money spent in creating DEI structures and hiring DEI commissars, and the time spent indoctrinating servicemembers in critical race theory and addressing an imaginary crisis of extremism in the ranks—all this detracts from the purpose of our military: preserving the security and freedom of the American people and nation.

These costs come at a time when the current administration is not even proposing to fund the Department of Defense to keep up with the rate of inflation—and a time when serious threats from China and other adversaries have never been greater.

Last month, Ramstein Air Base in Germany scheduled a drag queen story hour at its base library, where drag queen Stacey Teed was scheduled to read to children. When lawmakers back home got wind of the event and wrote to the Secretary of the Air Force, the event was cancelled. This suggests that pushback can be effective against the tide of wokeness plaguing our military. But there needs to be a lot more pushback.

Legislation introduced this year in Congress would stop the teaching of critical race theory in the military, the creation of the multitudes of diversity offices and officials, and the rolling back of physical fitness requirements. While the ultimate success of these proposals in the legislative process is uncertain, they are a start at least.

The American military remains a faithful and loyal servant of the republic. Most Americans are still proud and trusting of our military. But this trust and support cannot be taken for granted. If Americans perceive that the military is being exploited for political purposes or being used for experiments in woke social policies, that support will evaporate, and the consequences will be dire.

My hope and my prayer are that we figure this out before it is too late.

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