

Chairwoman Speier, Ranking Member Kelly, Distinguished members of this Committee, thank you for holding this hearing and for the opportunity to provide this testimony.

In the early morning of September 11, 2001, I walked out of my National Security Law seminar with a close friend and fellow West Point cadet. As we turned the corner, we came across a young instructor, a Major, who was transfixed by footage displayed by his projector. Inexplicably, a jetliner had crashed into a tower in the Financial District of Manhattan – the World Trade Center, he told us. The instructor, my fellow cadet, and I were dumbfounded. How could such a horrific accident take place? Then, together, we watched as the second plane crashed into the South Tower, erupting in flames. The Major glanced over his shoulder in our direction and then back to the screen.

“Well, gentlemen,” he told us, “it looks like we’re going to war.”

We graduated June 1st of the following year – 2002. By February 2003, I was in the Anbar Province of Iraq for my first of two deployments. But I was no stranger to service. My mother was a career educator in South Carolina, and my father, who was drafted and received the Bronze Star in connection with his service in Vietnam, spent his career helping veterans find work through the South Carolina Department of Employment and Workforce. Notwithstanding their upbringing in a segregated south, **they always stressed the importance of giving back to both our community and our country.**

But when my father was recruited to attend Officer Candidate School, he declined. Though he excelled in the military—men from his 1st Cavalry unit, all white, have reached out to me to praise him—my father saw an Army with leadership that did not seem to value men of color equally.

Although the military has made remarkable strides toward a true meritocracy since my father’s era, serious problems linger. I am immensely grateful for the opportunities my military service provided. I would not be sitting before this committee today had it not been for what I learned and achieved in the military. My appreciation and love for this service is, in fact, why I believe it is so important for this committee to engage in this discussion. The fact is that had I been afforded more direct mentorship and more examples of leaders who reflected my own life experience, I would have been more likely to remain a member of the Army. Like my father a half century before me, I decided to seek out other ways to continue serving my community and country.

Before addressing the challenges, we face and potential solutions, I’d like to establish why diversity of our military forces matters. First, it fosters cohesion. A report from Cornell University states, “**Some studies have found that higher overall levels of**

cohesion are associated with individual benefits of increased job satisfaction, retention, and better discipline outcomes.” This suggests that promoting inclusivity and respect within the ranks is not only the right thing to do morally **but also a matter of national security:** a more cohesive unit is a stronger fighting force. Moreover, in order to address a diverse set of threats across the globe, we must strive to include a diverse set of life experiences and perspectives. The young, female intelligence analyst from Oakland will view the world through a different lens than her male teammate from Biloxi or her older leader from Sante Fe, and this diversity helps overcome groupthink or tunnel vision, which in war can prove fatal.

With regard to retention, the Cornell report points out, “[V]arious studies and surveys have found that part of what attracts individuals to organizations and encourages retention is the individual’s perception of how they will fit into the organization. In this regard, diversity in leadership is considered by some to be a key element in attracting and retaining a diverse workforce.”

Insufficient diversity and representation continue to hamper recruitment and retention. For instance, a snapshot of West Point’s matriculation between 2014 and 2019 demonstrates a well-intentioned effort to create a more diverse culture, but the numbers fluctuate, with the Academy failing to meet its targets for African Americans from 2015 to 2017 while meeting or exceeding its goals in 2014, 2018, and 2019. The Academy has also established a variety of key efforts focused on minority communities—for example, the Office of Diversity, Inclusion, and Equal Opportunity as well as an emphasis on diversity and inclusion within the Academy’s strategic plan. It’s important to note that while these cadets will enter into an Army whose ranks are about one-third people of color, they represent less than ten percent of officer corps—its leaders. Given the importance of diversity to our national security interests, we must do better.

It’s also important to note that some of the current discourse in American society and some of the current administration’s policies could be affecting interest in serving, especially among minorities. The militarization of our nation’s southern border; the deportation of veterans; the potential rescission of the Parole in Place program; tenuous status of Dreamer service members and veterans; the transgender service ban; the fact that many major military bases are still named after Confederate leaders; the ongoing worries about white nationalism in the military’s ranks; and the fact that an individual who holds extreme views on race, continues to serve at the highest level of immigration policy-making—these factors risk causing a detrimental impact on our military’s ability to recruit and retain new and diverse talent. These factors have likely influenced the current sentiment among active duty service members. In a recently published report by research fellows at the National Defense University, a survey of 900 West Point cadets and senior military officers indicated that 73 percent of African-

American service members expressed pride in their military service, but only 45 percent said they would encourage a young person close to them to join the military today. This was nearly 20 percentage points lower than the next closest demographic. This is a trend that, if continued, would likely be devastating to readiness of our military.

Even the recent decision to intervene in three legal cases on behalf of those accused or convicted of war crimes could damage military recruitment. **As two fellow veterans, Joseph Kristol and Stephen Petraeus, recently wrote in a Washington Post op-ed, “[E]ven as the war in Afghanistan nears the end of its second decade, more than 70 percent of Americans express confidence in the military — a higher level than for any other American institution, according to Gallup. The president’s pardoning of those who dishonored the uniform threatens to erode this high level of confidence.”** A continued assault on the values, principles, and standards held dear by the military and by America will ensure that many people from marginalized communities remain distrustful of and disinterested in military service.

While this issue is admittedly complex and involves a myriad of dependent and independent variables, congressional action can play a stabilizing role.

Congress should pass legislation to address policies that have a negative impact on service members and their families. For example, Representative Jason Crow of Colorado, an Army veteran, recently introduced the Military Family Parole in Place Act, which would legally formalize a program that provides undocumented family members of military service members one-year reprieves from deportation. This type of action is a prime example of steps that can be taken to reassure service members from diverse communities that they are valued. By passing this legislation, Congress would send this message to not only current service members but also prospective ones.

Next, Congress should undertake a comprehensive review of the demographics of those applying for congressional nominations and those receiving them. The congressional nomination process serves as a barrier for those who are uninformed as to how to navigate it or who may not have requisite support from family or school systems. A review would help to identify gaps and determine the best way to fill them. Congress should conduct a similar review of ROTC statistics based on regional and demographic considerations. These types of reviews, which Congress has done in the past, should be conducted with strong bipartisan support.

There is no shortage of issues for Congress and this subcommittee to address. It was not my intent to provide an exhaustive list of what might be affecting minority recruitment and retention, but to instead highlight top concerns based on my own experiences and expertise.

Here, just a few days removed from the anniversary of Pearl Harbor, we are reminded of the sacrifices made by our military in service to this great nation. Investments in young people of color and women must be made at the outset of the recruitment process. Efforts to reach these communities cannot be an afterthought. Rather, they must be a central element of the Department of Defense's overall strategic plan, and Congress should exercise its powers to help ensure that our forces are equipped with the most capable and talented individuals this country has to offer.

Thank you for your time, and I look forward to your questions.