

---

## A Proxy War: Attacks on Diversity in the Military Target American Civil Rights

The far-right extremist campaign to dismantle diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI)<sup>1</sup> in the U.S. military is a proxy for their broader efforts to roll back civil rights in the United States. This campaign mainstreams disinformation about DEI, undermining the strength of the military and American democracy.

### Why the military's DEI initiatives are under attack

The antidemocratic far-right extremist movement's battle to remove DEI initiatives from the military furthers its broader attacks on inclusive policies in American society.<sup>2</sup> The movement mainstreams disinformation, perpetuating the idea that diversity harms American troops—and therefore all of America—despite the Department of Defense's (DoD) stated support for DEI.

- Anti-diversity initiatives stem from [reactionary strains in U.S. politics](#) previously framed as anti-communism, anti-feminism, or anti-civil rights. Today, the movement frames DEI as a threat to the military's emblematic role of American strength and patriotism.
- Prominent far-right actors, such as former media personality [Tucker Carlson](#), [Florida Governor Ron DeSantis](#), and the far-right think tank [The Heritage Foundation](#), stoke public opposition to DEI efforts by claiming DEI weakens the military.
- [DoD leadership](#) repeatedly defends DEI programs, arguing they improve [recruitment and retention efforts](#), bolster [force readiness](#), and address discrimination in an increasingly diverse military. More than [40 percent](#) of servicemembers identify as minorities, [the majority of whom have witnessed racism](#).

#### The 118<sup>th</sup> Congress: Attacking DEI in the Military

- 69 Members of Congress sponsored or co-sponsored legislation to defund or limit DEI efforts in the military.
- 16 bills targeting DEI in the military were introduced, double the number in the 117<sup>th</sup> Congress.
- 56 provisions and amendments harming DEI in the military were proposed in debate on the National Defense Authorization Act.

<sup>1</sup> Diversity refers to having different racial, sexual, and gendered demographics represented in a space. Equity describes the provision of equal opportunities afforded to all people. Inclusion requires open dialogue so that those represented are welcomed and valued in these spaces.

<sup>2</sup> The antidemocratic far-right extremist movement is an umbrella term that describes those working to transform America's multiracial, pluralistic, democratic system into one that is largely authoritarian and organized hierarchically according to race, ethnicity, religion, sex, and/or culture. This includes but is not limited to the xenophobic and anti-immigrant movement, the election denial movement, the male supremacist movement, and the white supremacist movement.



**Jim Banks** ✓  
@RepJimBanks



We are using the NDAA to get rid of wokeness at the Pentagon!

- slashing DEI pay
- requiring merit-based promotions
- eliminating chief diversity officer
- reinstating servicemembers who didn't take COVID vax
- defunding Navy Drag Queen program
- banning CRT



Representative Jim Banks spreading disinformation about DEI in the military, July 11, 2023.

### How extremism is normalized: Key mainstream narratives you may have heard

The movement's anti-DEI campaign targets inclusive policies in the military under the guise of "anti-wokeness."<sup>3</sup> Four common dog whistles for racist, homophobic, transphobic, and misogynistic attacks on the military's DEI efforts are: "Wokeness threatens force readiness," "Wokeness is an attack on masculinity," "Wokeness is unpatriotic," and "Wokeness harms recruitment and retention."

- **"Wokeness Threatens Force Readiness":** This narrative [claims DEI initiatives harm force readiness](#) by wasting valuable time and resources that should be spent on military skills training. In reality, the Pentagon [wasted more time](#) answering questions from Congress about DEI training in March 2023 than the average servicemember will spend on DEI training in a year.
- **"Wokeness is an Attack on Masculinity":** This narrative contends the military's DEI policies attack traditional ideals of masculinity and undercut national security by weakening troops. Senator Marco Rubio and Representative Chip echo this narrative in [Woke Warfighters: How Political Ideology is Weakening America's Military](#). [Senator Ted Cruz](#)

<sup>3</sup> "Woke" is a term originating from the U.S. Black community meaning to be "awakened" to issues of racial injustice. The far right has co-opted this term and weaponizes it to imply diversity efforts are unnecessary and harmful to society.

suggested LGBTQ+ inclusive recruitment efforts “emasculate” U.S. troops, leaving them vulnerable to adversaries like Russia.

- **“Wokeness is Unpatriotic”:** This narrative alleges that it is unpatriotic to correct systemic bias or address racism because those are attacks on American individualism and unfairly advantage minorities. Representative Dan Bishop [introduced legislation](#) to ban anti-racist and inclusive training in the military, claiming it teaches servicemembers to distrust or hate the United States.
- **“Wokeness Harms Recruitment and Retention”:** This narrative claims DEI initiatives disadvantage [white servicemembers](#) and the military’s ability to [recruit and retain white men](#). [Tucker Carlson](#) asserted that an “anti-white ideology” has permeated the military under the Biden Administration and [harmed retention](#). Instead, [experts suggest](#) a strong job market is more likely to contribute to recruitment challenges.



**Dan Crenshaw**   
@DanCrenshawTX



Texas just became the largest state to ban transgender procedures for minors — a huge win for protecting our children from radical gender ideology.

The mutilation of our kids has no place in Texas, or anywhere in this country.

1:28 PM · Jun 6, 2023 · **83.1K** Views

**128** Retweets   **13** Quotes   **2,178** Likes   **3** Bookmarks

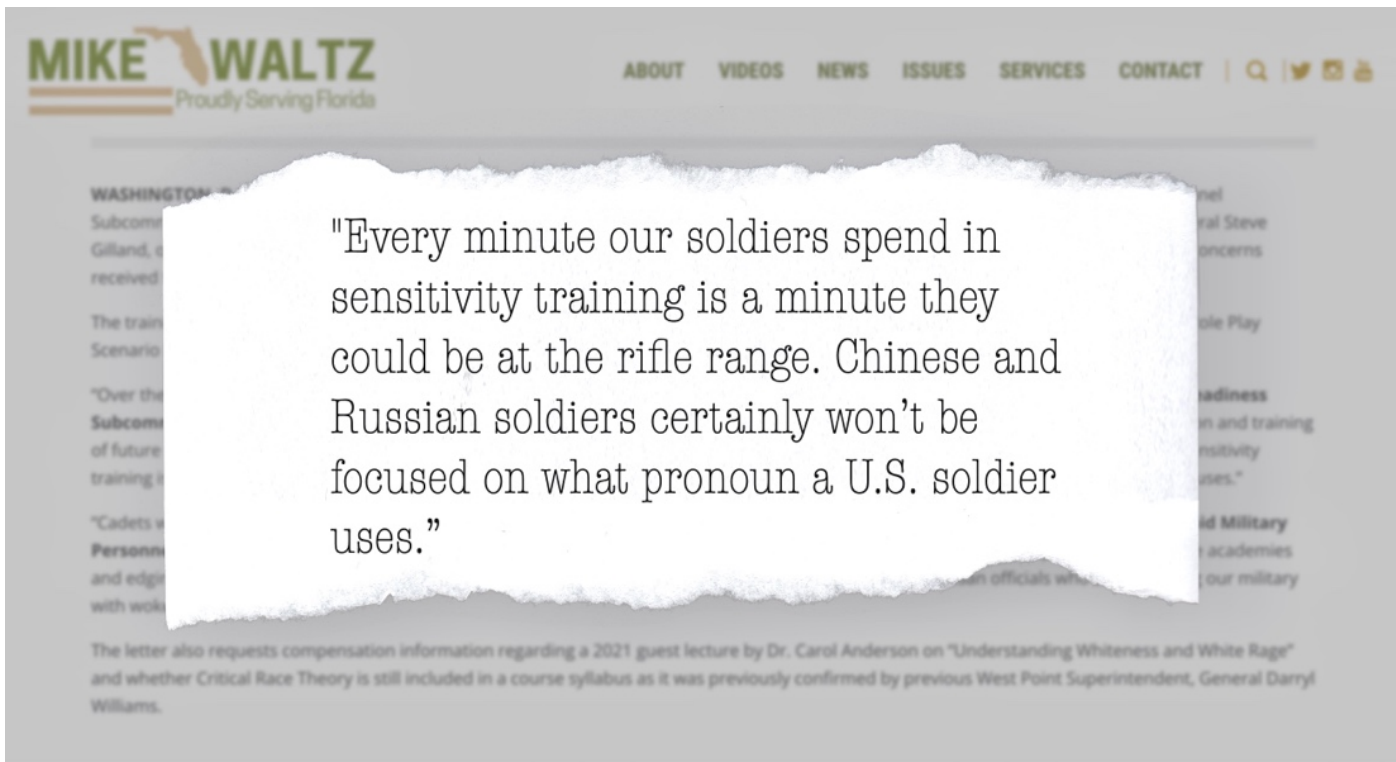
Representative Dan Crenshaw responding to diversity training in the U.S. Navy, June 21, 2022.

### Lines of attack: How attacks on DEI in the military amplify the broader campaign against inclusion

The movement’s focus on the military strategically elevates the broader anti-DEI campaign from state and local discussions to the national stage, including congressional discourse. Attacks on military DEI initiatives target servicemember training, medical access, and career potential, amplifying similarly exclusionary efforts in civil society regarding education, healthcare, and employment.

- **Education:** The movement criticizes military academies for [integrating DEI programs](#) into training. Two members of Congress [decried](#) the U.S. Military Academy at West Point’s cadet training on gender-neutral pronouns, [mirroring reactionary responses](#) to gender-inclusive policies in schools. By falsely insinuating the training undermines military preparedness, these Members of Congress frame their bigotry as a national security issue.

- **Healthcare:** One of the movement's primary objectives is [removing access](#) to gender-affirming care for servicemembers and their families. Like the [bills introduced in 16 states this year](#) to restrict gender affirming care, multiple [House amendments](#) to the National Defense Authorization Act pushed to end trans-inclusive health care for servicemembers, veterans, and their families.
- **Employment:** [Congress's repeated efforts](#) to eliminate the DoD's "Chief Diversity Officer," if successful, would undermine the prioritizing of diversity by the nation's largest employer. This effort amplifies the movement's [broader rejection](#) of inclusive employment policies.



Quote from Representative Mike Waltz regarding West Point DEI training, March 23, 2023.

## The harmful impact of extremist attacks on DEI policies in the military

The growth and normalization of the anti-DEI campaign adversely impacts the military and defense community by limiting potential recruits and creating policies that harm active-duty servicemembers and their families. More specifically, the campaign weakens military readiness, supports extremism within the ranks, harms minority servicemembers, and undermines national security and democracy.

- **Weakens Military Readiness:** Discrimination harms recruitment, retention, and ultimately [force readiness](#) by undermining unit cohesion and creating discord. Anti-DEI efforts harm readiness by creating an environment of uncertainty for [minority servicemembers](#) or servicemembers with LGBTQ+ dependents.
- **Supports Extremism within Ranks:** The anti-DEI campaign emboldens extremists by [providing tacit support](#) for white supremacy, misogyny, and anti-LGBTQ+ hate within the ranks. The DoD's Inspector General received [211 internal reports of domestic extremism](#) in 2022, and in 2019 over [a third of troops](#) report witnessing "white nationalism or ideological-driven racism," according to a Military Times survey.



- **Harms Minority Servicemembers:** The anti-DEI campaign encourages the DoD to ignore extremism and internal practices that create inequitable and even dangerous environments for Black, Brown, women, LGBTQ+ and other minority servicemembers. Black and Brown servicemembers face multiple forms of [bias and discrimination](#) in everything from promotions to discipline. Policies like the Clinton Administration's '[Don't Ask, Don't Tell](#)', the Trump Administration's military [Transgender Ban](#), and Senator Rubio's "[Ensuring Military Readiness](#)" Act of 2023 target LGBTQ+ servicemembers.
- **Undermines National Security and Democracy:** Attacks on DEI distract from the [threat extremists](#) pose to national security and to the safety of servicemembers and their families. The movement's policies create fissures that adversarial state and non-state actors [could leverage](#). Additionally, if the military fails to uphold the very democratic values it is charged with defending, it undermines our democracy.



Tucker Carlson on FOX News, March 26, 2021.



Tweet from Senator Ted Cruz, May 20, 2021.

## Take action

There are many ways to support DEI efforts in the military community and your own.

- **Reject Extremist Narratives:** The antidemocratic far right's most effective weapon is disinformation. Name disinformation when seen in your community, by public officials, or in the media. Refuse to accept its purveyors whitewashing or monopolizing public discourse. To intervene online and in-person, see this [resource](#).
- **Get Involved and Support the Military Community:** A vibrant democracy represents all its citizens and requires your participation. That includes supporting the military community and pushing back on local policies and legislation that harm minorities in the military. For more ideas on how to get involved contact Human Rights First's project, [Veterans for American Ideals](#).
- **Support DEI Policies in the Military and Reject Discriminatory Policies:** Urge your elected representatives to support DEI recruitment and retention practices and DEI training. Push for increased access to specialized healthcare for women and LGBTQ+ servicemembers and their families. Encourage equitable opportunities for promotion and leadership for Black, Brown, women, LGBTQ+, and other minority servicemembers. Urge Congress to provide equitable benefits and recognition for LGBTQ+ servicemembers and their families. Support the DoD's efforts to remove white supremacy and other forms of extremism within the ranks. Additionally, encourage Congress to reject discriminatory policies such as the [Military Merit, Fairness and Equality \(MERIT\) Act](#), which targets equity efforts among servicemembers, and the [Ensuring Military Readiness Act of 2023](#), which discriminates against trans servicemembers.

---

## Mission

We work to create a just world in which every person's intrinsic human rights are respected and protected, to build societies that value and invest in all their people. To reach that goal demands assisting victims of injustice, bringing perpetrators of abuse to justice, and building institutions that ensure universal rights.

To learn more about our work, please visit [humanrightsfirst.org](http://humanrightsfirst.org) or email us: [ExtremismInfo@humanrightsfirst.org](mailto:ExtremismInfo@humanrightsfirst.org)