



Statement for the Record of

Human Rights First

On

U.S. House Committee on Oversight and Accountability

U.S. House Subcommittee on National Security, the Border, and Foreign Affairs

“The Risks of Progressive Ideologies in the U.S. Military”

January 12, 2024

I. About Human Rights First

Established in 1978, Human Rights First is an independent, non-profit organization that for more than four decades has pressed the United States to take a leading role in promoting and defending human rights. The organization's work includes advocacy and action to challenge authoritarianism, systemic injustice, and the antidemocratic extremist movement that represents an existential threat to our communities and our democracy. Efforts to ensure diversity and equality within our democracy are central to this work.

II. Overview

Human Rights First is alarmed at the far-right extremist campaign to dismantle diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) in the military under the guise of calling out so-called 'progressive ideologies'. We see this attack on vital programs and policies as a proxy for their broader efforts to roll back civil rights in the United States. This campaign mainstreams extremist rhetoric, spreads disinformation about DEI, and undermines the strength of the military and American democracy.

The struggle for a more inclusive and diverse military has been a cornerstone of American democracy since President Truman's Executive Order 9981 [ending military segregation](#). These efforts have not been linear, with [people of color](#), [women](#), and [LGBTQ+ members](#) facing an uneven road to equity, compounded by internal and external discrimination. The recent attacks on DEI efforts are part of a lineage of oppression these groups continue to face and a stain on the progress made over the years. We stand with the military leaders, servicemembers, and veterans who are calling for a fairer and more inclusive environment for our service members.

III. Why DEI Matters in the Military

Diversity, equity, and inclusion efforts have been critical to creating and maintaining a strong United States military force. With over 40 percent of servicemembers identifying as minorities, policies to address and support a diverse force remain critical. As the military, much like the United States as a whole, becomes [increasingly diverse](#), there remains a significant [gap in racial](#) and gendered representation [at the highest ranks](#). DEI efforts seek to address this gap and the structured barriers minority servicemembers face in career advancement.

The anti-DEI campaign encourages the Department of Defense (DoD) to ignore both extremist threats, and internal DoD practices, both of which can 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.

[Discrimination harms recruitment, retention](#), and ultimately force readiness by undermining unit cohesion and creating discord. Anti-DEI efforts exacerbate this issue by restricting efforts to address it and promoting an environment of exclusion and discrimination.

IV. Anti-DEI Campaign Mainstreams Extremism & Undermines National Security

The mainstreaming of extremism in the United States is a significant threat facing our nation and one that has impacted Military and veteran communities. Members of the military community play [an](#)

[outsized role](#) in extremist activity, and veterans [remain a leading target](#) for recruitment by far-right extremists.

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.

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.

V. Recommendations for Supporting DEI Efforts in the Military

Human Rights First supports federal efforts to ensure a vibrant democracy and thriving military community. The 2023 NDAA included provisions undermining DEI initiatives across the DoD, while ultimately rejecting other discriminatory amendments, such as those prohibiting medical coverage of gender-affirming care. Furthermore, many similarly extreme riders are being proposed by the House in the upcoming appropriations bills, including those blocking non-discrimination and DEI efforts. Therefore, we recommend Congress:

- **Support DEI Policies and Funding in the Military:** Support the continuance of 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 confront white supremacy and other forms of extremism within the ranks.
- **Reject Discriminatory Policies and Funding Cuts to DEI:** Continue to reject 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.
- **Reject the Mainstreaming of Extremist Narratives and Disinformation in the Military:** The antidemocratic far right's most effective weapon is disinformation and that extends to their rejection of diversity and inclusion efforts. The intent of this campaign is to sow confusion and outrage around efforts to end racism, discrimination, and inequality. Members of Congress must challenge the use of dog-whistles and disinformation that obscure the discriminatory intent behind anti-DEI efforts.