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The Problem with a ‘Woke’ Military

A push for progressive policies in the military bureaucracy threatens the unity and meritocracy that make our armed forces effective.

By [Robert M. Berg](#)

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I used to belong to a war-fighting organization, where we were taught a shared set of Army values. We were taught mission accomplishment before all else, enforced by “mission first and people always.” Within the Department of Defense (DoD) Diversity and Inclusion Strategic Plan we are told that “diversity is a strategic imperative — critical to mission readiness and accomplishment.” We are also [told](#), by Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin, that it must be a priority for the military “to look like America and not only in the ranks, but our leadership should look like America.” On the surface, this sounds okay. But it flips what had long been a soldier’s commitment to the Army and mission: The new priority turns the Army into a social experiment at the cost of mission readiness. The new push within the DoD for diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) goes well beyond measures to ensure equal opportunity and instead looks to create preferences that have nothing to do with merit. Our military will suffer if it does not change course.

Believing that the Army should be and has been the best example of a meritocracy in the history of the world has become a forbidden position. The only acceptable position now is full acceptance of all elements of DEI. Examples abound, from the more benign recent recruiting messages depicting cartoon stories — one of an “activist” soldier — all the way to creating a new permanent DEI infrastructure to push policies in line with critical race theory. That I am not allowed to openly hold the position that warfighting and combat readiness should be the Army’s top priority, while being force-fed a radical DEI agenda, demonstrates the open erosion of mission-first principles within the military.

This is a real and serious change, and politician veterans such as [Senator Tom Cotton](#) and Representative [Dan Crenshaw](#) are right to be worried about it. The Army used to be a values-based organization focused on mission accomplishment above all else. These values were drilled into every soldier during initial entry training and reinforced at unit level. This was done through two long-standing Army traditions, an inability to spell and the overwhelming need to make everything an acronym. So we settled on LDRSHIP (pronounced “leadership”): loyalty, duty, respect, selfless service, honor, integrity, and personal courage. These values were all pitched toward the idea of leaving your past behind, as you had become part of an organization with a larger purpose. Diversity is not our strength; our shared values and singularity of purpose toward mission accomplishment is our strength. In fact, to “fight and win our nation’s wars,” we need conformity toward the mission-first mindset. We were taught that what came before the Army

did not matter. All that matters was how you form a team to accomplish a wide range of demanding mission sets.

The Army does not exist to care for soldiers. Soldiers should not join the Army to be cared for by the Army. It is called “service” for a reason, and military members are still the most respected profession in the country because of the acknowledgment of the sacrifices required for service. Soldiers enter the Army fully understanding the individual sacrifices required for service. While individual welfare is important, it is secondary to mission accomplishment.

By definition, the Army is not inclusive. You can be excluded from service for a wide range of reasons, many (though not all) of which are out of the control of the potential recruit. We have all heard that over [70 percent](#) of our youth are not qualified for military service, because we are exclusively looking for people who can meet the physical and physiological demands of service. If Austin really wanted a military that “look[ed] like America,” he would have to abandon such requirements entirely. Now of course, military exclusivity should be directly related to one’s ability or inability to perform the role one is potentially being recruited for. But to say that DEI policies are always strategic imperatives, without offering any evidence as to why, is simply fantasy.

It is true that recruiting from a broad breadth of society will strengthen the military, by ensuring the whole of the country is vested in defense of the nation. However, the idea that celebrating and promoting “diversity and inclusion” — emphasizing things such as race, religion, gender, or other non-merit-based traits instead of focusing on common culture and combat readiness — enhances the Army lacks evidence. In fact, DEI should not be used in any decisions within military manning or policy after initial recruitment. Attempting to highlight these external “traits” as bearing weight in making decisions for assignments, policy, or training ignores what the real strength of the military is. Unity of purpose and a shared set of core military values of individual merit is what binds us, not lumping people into “diversity” buckets.

Instead of focusing on war-fighting principles and shared values, the Army has decided to engage in a constant bombardment in the name of equity, from rolling out ill-conceived training on everything from unconscious bias to critical race theory and standing up DEI offices at every level. The Special Operations Command Diversity and Inclusion Strategic Plan 2021 outlines what the rest of the force can expect: “Establish corporate diversity and inclusion infrastructure throughout the enterprise . . . to build a permanent framework for sustained, meaningful efforts.” The idea is to create a new permanent bureaucracy to enforce “equity” regardless of merit. The document even boasts, under best practices, that they have added “unconscious bias [training and] . . . diversity and inclusion modules to its Executive Training with the goal of advancing and messaging diversity and inclusion.”

The Army People Strategy from September 2020 has an entire annex dedicated to “diversity, equity, and inclusion.” This document calls for the creation of permanent organizations with the following as an ultimate goal: “Army resources all DEI agencies and staff to levels that allow continuous monitoring, assessing, and updating of DEI policies, programs, and procedures which seek to prevent biases against any Soldier or Civilian.” In other words, you will comply or else, and diversity is a strategic imperative because we say so. “The Army . . . must also understand

how to *communicate why DEI is critical to the success of the Army profession and how to appreciate, leverage, and integrate principles of DEI into all aspects of its operations.*” (Emphasis added.)

I fully expect to see DEI officers at every level — who will operate outside of the command they are there to “support” — to ensure that quotas are met and that radicalized, race-based training is conducted. The strategy states that it is imperative to “ensure DEI principles and policies are integrated into the Army Campaign Plan, Army People Strategy, and Army talent-management processes for all military and civilian personnel.” In other words, goals and targets will be met regardless of the effect on the fighting force, and the new DEI bureaucracy will be there to ensure your compliance. It goes on to say that the Army will “establish and implement procedures for achieving *desired Army diversity outcomes* through diversity policy and talent management principles and practices.” (Emphasis added.) Let there be no doubt, this is well beyond equal opportunity: This is race- and sex-based preferences.

Military skills are unique, so your past experiences lend you little aid. The military truly is a humbling experience to all. It forces people to either rise to the occasion or fall by the wayside, neither of which has anything to do with race, sex, or other immutable (but superfluous) traits. The only way to succeed is to conform to the military team mindset and judge those around you by how they contribute to the team and mission, while rejecting those who refuse to honor the military values and individual merit. To remain the fighting force this country needs, military leaders should discard this nonsense that the military is systemically oppressive and requires DEI-based correction. They should instead highlight the military as the example where your past does not matter, but only your willingness to work toward a common mission does. Show the military for what it is: an organization in which our unity and our values are our strength.

These DEI efforts are not designed to unite us but instead look to create a permanent structure to ensure that “woke” policies are enforced throughout the Army, with little or no thought given to mission priorities. I have yet to see a single document about DEI that makes a creditable case that DEI efforts are designed foremost with mission accomplishment in mind. These new DEI policies and offices are not designed to unite us. Indeed, they go well beyond a simple distraction from mission priorities. They are being pushed as *the priority*. Bring back war-fighting and mission-first mindset as our priorities. After all, it is only the defense of the free world at stake.

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