

How DEI Caused a Military Recruitment Crisis

By Mike Gallagher
And Kevin Wallsten

In his recent viral essay, “The Lost Generation,” published in *Compact*, Jacob Savage describes how U.S. media and academia in the 2010s closed their doors to millennial white men. The self-righteous, racist ideology of diversity, equity and inclusion wasn’t a problem only within those rarified fields. It also infected the U.S. armed forces. Under President Biden, senior officers worked to make our military less white, precipitating a recruitment crisis.

During the first Trump administration, lethality was the military’s overriding focus. That changed in

2021. Mr. Biden issued an executive order embedding “diversity, equity, inclusion, and accessibility” across “all parts of the Federal workforce.” Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin took the unprecedented step of ordering a “stand-down” to combat “extremism” in the armed forces. By the time an independent report commissioned by the Pentagon found these concerns to be baseless, they had already formed the ideological permission structure for a DEI crusade.

In 2022, Gen. C.Q. Brown (later promoted to chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff) issued a memorandum that set numerical quotas for everyone from white males to Pacific Islander females among commissioned officer applicants to the Air

Force. Racial discrimination likewise distorted admissions to the U.S. Naval Academy. Black applicants scoring in the fourth decile had an admission rate higher than that of whites in the eighth decile.

These stories could have come out of Mr. Savage’s essay, but the military isn’t the media. It requires young people to sign up for unglamorous and sometimes dangerous jobs far from home. By signaling that white men were less welcome, DEI initiatives pushed thousands of them away from military service.

Between 2013 and 2023, annual male enlistments in the Army fell 35%, from 58,000 to 37,700. From 2018 to 2023 the number of white Army recruits dropped from 44,042 to 25,070. No other groups saw such steep declines. Meanwhile the share of white high school boys who in Monitoring the Future surveys said the military is doing a “good” or “very good” job declined from 76% in 2014 to 57% in 2024.

The focus on DEI also fueled a “recommendation recession.” The percentage of white male veterans who said in a 2019 Pew study that they would advise a young family member to join the military was 81%. Only 63% said so in the 2024 Survey of Military Veterans, which also asked why. Far more white male respondents pointed to the military’s “DEI and other social policies” (66%) than to the “possibility of physical injury or death” (38%) or the “possibility of psychological problems” (35%). These recommendations matter: According

to a 2023 article in the *Journal*, 80% of recruits have relatives who served.

Our best chance to reverse these disastrous Biden-era trends is the “reset” led by current Defense Secretary Pete Hegseth, which eliminates DEI, implements sex-neutral standards, and re-emphasizes war fighting.

Initial evidence suggests the reset is working, with the Pentagon announcing its “best recruiting numbers in 15 years.” All active-duty services met their fiscal 2025

The Biden administration discouraged white recruits. Secretary Hegseth’s ‘reset’ invites everyone to serve.

recruiting goals, and 2026 recruiting numbers suggest “a strong and promising start.” The Pentagon hasn’t released data on white male enlistments, but the postelection 2024 Reagan National Defense Survey found a 12-point increase in the willingness of white people under 30 to serve compared with a year before. In the 2025 survey, the share of adults who would encourage a young person to join the military increased 8 points among whites and 14 points among veterans from two years earlier.

DEI advocates often framed their initiatives as necessary to attract female and nonwhite recruits.

Today’s evidence contradicts that self-serving view. Female recruitment is up from 16,725 in 2024 to 23,985 in 2025. Encouragement to enlist increased among blacks (9 points), Hispanics (14 points), and women under 55 (15 points) since 2023 in the Reagan National Defense Survey.

The Hegseth reset alone didn’t end the recruitment crisis. A successful operation in Iran and administrative and operational reforms also helped. But it is clear that stressing identity over mission drives young people away, while emphasizing merit and lethality helps the military recruit across demographic lines.

If the U.S. wants to sustain its all-volunteer force, we must rebuild trust in the military as a uniquely egalitarian institution in which standards are uniformly high, excellence is rewarded, and no one receives special treatment. And we must maintain this commitment across administrations.

The conversation around DEI discrimination is long overdue. It isn’t about who wins MacArthur genius grants, but whether our military can fulfill its sacred duty.

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