



## **Eroding Critical Thinking: The Quiet Dismantling of Academic Freedom in the Department of Defense**

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**Abstract:** Educational institutions across the Department of Defense (DoD) have mandated changes that are undermining both academic freedom and critical thinking to comply with executive orders and mandates from the Secretary of Defense (SECDEF). This paper details recent leadership changes, executive orders, and DoD directives issued between January 20 and April 30, 2025. It outlines how efforts to eliminate diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) content, restore “merit-based” standards, and eliminate “woke” ideology from the military are affecting DoD educational institutions. The authors, writing under pseudonyms due to fear of professional reprisal, conducted an investigative inquiry based on confidential interviews with faculty members and administrators across military service academies, DoD graduate medical programs, post-graduate programs, and professional military education institutions. Informant inputs were confirmed through artifacts provided by interviewees and/or triangulation with press releases and media articles. Contributors’ accounts revealed substantial changes affecting curriculum, research, academic resources, and common spaces. While local experiences varied, most reported a chilling effect on academic freedom, with courses on race, gender, and related social issues canceled, research projects halted, academic resources removed, common spaces sanitized, and curriculum increasingly constrained by ideological oversight. In many cases, institutional leaders adopted highly cautious or inconsistent interpretations of new directives, creating confusion and further disrupting teaching and scholarship. The authors argue that this narrowing of permissible teaching and inquiry threatens the core mission of liberal education in the military—namely, the development of critical thinking, ethical reasoning, and intellectual openness among future officers. Ultimately, new restrictions undermine military readiness and national security by limiting vital research and by suppressing military members’ capacity to engage with complex, real-world challenges inherent in the global security environment.

**Author's Note**

The authors of this piece have chosen to write under pseudonyms out of concern for reprisals from Department of Defense (DoD) leadership. Their decision underscores a broader erosion of academic freedom within the DoD. These contributors include both active-duty service members and long-serving citizens of the DoD academic community.

The views expressed are those of the authors and do not represent the DoD.

On March 26, 2025, the Superintendents of all three Military Service Academies testified before Congress, at which time each Superintendent provided a written statement and then answered specific questions (Alderson Court Reporting, 2025). In response to being asked whether Critical Race Theory is being taught at the United States Air Force Academy, Lieutenant General Tony Bauernfeind—the three-star general and Superintendent of the Academy—responded: “In accordance with law, on the 2024 NDAA [National Defense Authorization Act], we no longer teach critical race theory.” He went on to state: “**We are delving hard on teaching our future leaders *how to think, not what to think***” (Alderson Court Reporting, 2025, p. 44; emphasis added).

This assertion in General Bauernfeind’s testimony should resonate with those in the higher education community, as it is consistent with the intent of liberal education: to deliver “broad knowledge of the wider world (e.g., science, culture, society)” and to teach in a way that “empowers individuals and prepares them to deal with complexity, diversity, and change” so that they can “apply knowledge and skills in real-world settings” (American Association of Colleges and Universities, n.d.). In short, liberal education is about teaching students *how* to critically think inside the classroom and beyond. It fosters curiosity and encourages collecting knowledge from multiple perspectives to develop one’s own viewpoint – whatever that may ultimately be. Liberal education’s aims to expand students’ access to diverse ideas and to develop critical thinkers serve as guiding values for faculty delivering higher education.

Some would argue that Service Academies hold a different mission, as Department of Defense (DoD) Instructions mandate they “provide newly commissioned officers dedicated to a career of professional excellence in service to the nation.” However, that same Instruction also charges service academies to “generate a core group of innovative leaders capable of thinking critically” (Department of Defense, 2015). The Instruction goes on to note that both missions are essential to “long-term readiness and success in the military.” The military’s need to develop critical thinkers is especially vital in 21<sup>st</sup> century conflict, which often involves non-state actors, hybrid warfare, and contested information environments where cultural dynamics shape perceptions, alliances, and behaviors. Critical thinking enables military and civilian

leaders to analyze ambiguous situations, challenge assumptions, and enhance operational effectiveness. Thus, Lieutenant General Bauernfeind's testimony also aligns with what the DoD says Service Academies will do—create critical thinkers devoted to serving our nation.

Unfortunately, despite General Bauernfeind's testimony, those aims and practices are currently being dismantled across educational institutes in the DoD—not just at Service Academies, but at other DoD educational institutions. Some of these changes are well-documented by the media and are far reaching. They have affected higher education and the federal government more broadly, including cuts to federal grants, related research, and government positions. But specific changes at Service Academies, DoD medical graduate schools, and other military educational institutions are happening more quietly. Each institution is making different decisions about what materials to cut, how to do it, and whether to act at all. These changes are creating rippled ramifications for both faculty and students. The impacts at this more localized level have received less attention, particularly from underrepresented academic perspectives—those whose primary roles are to teach critical thinking to this generation's servicemembers. If this trend continues, the United States military will be less prepared to meet the complex challenges facing our nation.

This paper serves to document undergraduate, graduate, and post-graduate level education changes in the Department of Defense. The changes described reflect a clear shift from teaching *how* to think to teaching *what* to think (and, more chillingly, what *not* to think). Although this shift is framed as a necessary counter to specific “woke” ideologies (e.g., critical race theory) that have “infiltrated” DoD education (see EO 14151), it has led to directives that rely on new leaders' specific (and scientifically unsupportable) ideologies regarding race, gender, religion, and the “ideal” warrior. Given the speed of changes and varying effects, we cover only the first 101 days of the Trump Presidency: from January 20, 2025, through April 30, 2025. To afford context, we begin by introducing key pieces of ideology put forward by President Trump and the newly appointed Secretary of Defense (SECDEF). Then, we highlight notable Executive Orders and SECDEF directives that specifically target educational institutions within the Department of Defense. Next, we describe specific responses occurring at various DoD

educational institutions, including changes to curriculum, research, academic resources and common spaces, based on inputs from trusted contributors across the DoD. We conclude by summarizing how these changes can be expected to affect research, critical thinking, and national security.

### **Broader Context: Instilling Ideology**

#### **Changes in Leadership**

The President of the United States serves as Commander in Chief of the United States military. Upon taking office, President Trump quickly sought to implement campaign promises to remove transgender members from the military (The White House, 2025d). Additionally, he sought to “restore merit and lethality” in the military by prohibiting “radical,” “woke” practices, which he blamed for lagging recruiting numbers (The White House, 2025c). He also pledged to “get rid of the ‘woke’ generals who prioritize social experiments over warfighting” (The White House, 2025c). The Commander in Chief’s priorities drive the priorities and actions of all leaders across the Department of Defense.

President Trump’s nominee for SECDEF, Pete Hegseth, espoused views congruent with President Trump’s prior to his nomination. In his book, *The War on Warriors: Behind the Betrayal of the Men Who Keep Us Free*, Hegseth (2024) outlined his arguments against women serving in the military: “Dads push us to take risks. Moms put the training wheels on our bike. We need moms. But not in the military, especially in combat units.” He went on to criticize America for over-tolerating the identities of “misfits,” arguing instead that “normal dudes have always fought and won wars—prove me wrong” (Hegseth, 2024).

Additionally, Hegseth (2024) opposed openly gay and lesbian service members and criticized efforts to rename military bases honoring Confederate figures. He argued that women and minorities who are promoted to the highest ranks are usually less qualified, and that attempts to attract more women and minorities to service were off-putting: “Turns out, all the ‘diversity’ recruiting messages made certain kids—white kids—feel like they’re not wanted.” In contrast, survey data from the Army shows that

very few say they are deterred from enlisting due to “wokeness.” In fact, concerns about discrimination against women and minorities is seen as a bigger issue (Baldor, 2023).

Further, in podcasts and other forums, Mr. Hegseth expressed intent to remove “woke” leaders. For example, on the “Shawn Ryan Show” podcast he said: “Well, first of all, you got to fire, you know, you got to fire the chairman of the Joint Chiefs. . . . Any general that was involved, general, admiral, whatever that was involved in any of the DEI woke shit, it’s got to go” (Shawn Ryan Show, 2024). Further, on “The Right Take with Mark Tapson” he noted: “Every time I hear a military leader say [diversity is our strength], I throw up in my mouth a little bit more, because if they believe it, it shows you how sideways and how indoctrinated they are” (Charalambous, 2024). A primary argument in his book and media appearances is that the military’s primary constituency is “strong, normal men” (Charalambous, 2024). On the Tapson podcast, he noted: “There aren’t enough lesbians in San Francisco to staff the 82<sup>nd</sup> Airborne like you need; you need the boys in Kentucky and Texas and North Carolina and Wisconsin” (Charalambous, 2024). These “anti-woke” perspectives were stated in less controversial language during his confirmation hearing, when Mr. Hegseth articulated how he might actualize his vision at Military Academies: “We need more uniformed members going back into West Point, the Air Force Academy, the Naval Academy as a tour to teach with their wisdom of what they’ve learned in uniform instead of just more civilian professors that came from the same left-wing, woke universities that they left and then try to push that into service academies” (Cochran, 2025).

Shortly after his confirmation, Hegseth acted on his expressed ideology. In a memo titled “Restoring America’s Fighting Force” he outlined specific directives, justifying their implementation as necessary “to win the Nation’s wars” by rewarding “individual initiative, excellence, and hard work based on merit” (Secretary of Defense, 2025). The memo goes on to state, “Diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) policies . . . are incompatible with the values of DoD. The DoD will strive to provide merit-based, color-blind, equal opportunities to service members but will not guarantee or strive for equal outcomes” (Secretary of Defense, 2025).

To follow, the Pentagon leveraged task forces to advance these priorities, creating a climate of fear and mistrust (Lacovara, 2025) fueled by inconsistent

messaging. While Secretary Hegseth claimed to champion merit, he paradoxically dismissed those who have achieved the highest levels of merit—top military leaders and legal experts dedicated to ensuring the military adheres to constitutional law, which we will detail more below.

Hegseth's communication style has been problematic across the broader DoD. Military professionals are expected to follow DoD leaders, but successful followership relies on a clear and consistent vision of intent. The Army identifies trust as the bedrock of its profession (U.S. Army, 2016). Commander's intent is a fundamental responsibility of any competent military leader and essential to building trust (Department of the Air Force, 2014). One of the most critical duties of a commander is to foster a command climate that encourages teamwork, cohesion, and trust. This involves clearly articulating goals, priorities, values, and expectations, while providing reliable feedback. Instead of clearly articulating vision and goals, SECDEF Hegseth has relied on vague, divisive language, waging a cultural battle surrounding DEI rather than focusing on unifying the force to address pressing national security concerns.

A clear indicator of this cultural battle is SEDEF Hegseth's frequent use of the term "woke" in directives, public statements, and policies. This use of slang without clear definitions is in stark contrast to how commanders are instructed to articulate their intents. Further, it ignores that the term, even in its historical vernacular, is context dependent (Dictionary.com, n.d.). The repeated use of the vague and politically charged term "woke" to drive policy creates ambiguity and mistrust among subordinates, as followers are left to interpret meaning and brace for potential punishment should they unintentionally fall outside its undefined bounds.

### **How This Ideology Is Affecting the Broader DoD**

**Eliminating online mentions of (undefined) DEI:** In a memo from late February 2025, SECDEF Hegseth ordered: "By March 5, 2025, all Components must remove and archive DoD news articles, photos, and videos promoting Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI), including content related to critical race theory, gender ideology, and identity-based programs" (Assistant to the Secretary of Defense, 2025). This quick-

turn but vague mandate resulted in 26,000 images flagged and deleted immediately, with up to 100,000 stories, posts and images projected to be removed from Department of Defense websites (Copp et al., 2025).

Many stories deleted are those of servicemembers who have borne a large share of combat burdens. Examples include the Harlem Hellfighters, the Tuskegee Airmen, and the Cultural Support Teams in Iraq and Afghanistan. Many of the deleted stories showcase trailblazing service members and units who achieved significant military firsts. Among them were Kristen Griest, the first woman to graduate from the Army Ranger School, and Nicole Malachowski, the first woman to fly with the elite Thunderbirds team (Beynon, 2025; Clark, 2024; Copp et al., 2025). The Secretary's references to "misfits," combined with mandates to delete historical military figures who are women and minorities, send clear messages about who is deemed to have merit and who does not.

**Canceling history months:** In his memo, "Identity Groups are Dead," SECDEF Hegseth wrote: "Our unity and purpose are instrumental to meeting the Department's warfighting mission. Efforts to divide the force—to put one group ahead of another—erode camaraderie and threaten mission execution. Going forward, DoD Components and Military Departments will not use official resources, to include man-hours, to host celebrations or events related to cultural awareness months, including National African American/Black History Month, Women's History Month, Asian American and Pacific Islander Heritage Month, Pride Month, National Hispanic Heritage Month, National Disability Employment Awareness Month, and National American Indian Heritage Month" (Department of Defense, 2025).

**Disbanding Barrier Analysis Working Groups (BAWGs) and Related Research:** Army and Air Force volunteer working groups charged with identifying and mitigating barriers that may disproportionately affect military women and minority service members were cancelled based on interpretations that they fell under "DEI programs" (Nieberg, January 23, 2025). The initiatives that BAWGs were working on were tied to improving women and minority members' abilities to serve safely and effectively, such as improving fit in women's body armor, streamlining shaving waiver

processes for individuals with documented skin conditions (an issue that disproportionately affects Black men), enabling Native American service members to wear longer hair as a religious or cultural accommodation, and improving urination devices for women aviators (Nieberg, 2025). BAWG cancellation directives offered no information regarding if any other entity would take on this important work (Secretary of the Air Force, 2025). They were simply cancelled based on “DEI.”

Related to disbanding BAWGs, research efforts specific to women’s warfighting strengths have also been cancelled. Examples of past vital research in this area include: sleep pattern differences in male/female navy sailors, gender differences in suicide and suicide attempts among US Army soldiers, sex differences in iron status throughout military training, and sex differences in the physiological response to demanding military field exercise (Maguen et al., 2015; O’Leary et al., 2023; Shattuck et al., 2025; Vikmoen et al., 2020). The latter study found that males lose more body mass and muscle during field exercise, while females recover faster in explosive strength following field exercises. Cancelling these lines of inquiry ultimately works against the protection of service members. By discouraging sex and gender research, DoD leaders risk overlooking key differences and advantages in war. Female physiology offers several performance benefits relevant to modern warfare. According to experts cited in *Oxford’s Military Medicine Journal*, these include metabolic efficiency, enhanced cardiovascular adaptability, greater relative muscle strength gains following intensive training, improved bone health, and strong decision-making performance under stress (Dyches et al., 2023). Despite this evidence, science-based exploration of female warfighter advantages has stalled within the Department of Defense due to perceptions these efforts are “DEI.”

**Disproportionately firing minority leaders:** President Donald Trump dismissed Air Force Gen. Charles Q. Brown Jr., the second Black Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, and Coast Guard Adm. Linda L. Fagan, citing his belief that DEI initiatives were responsible for them being placed into leadership roles. In both instances he referred to them as leaders who were overly focused on DEI (Gordon, 2025). Later, he fired Navy Vice Adm. Shoshana Chatfield, the U.S. representative to NATO’s Military committee.

While he did not cite the reason he fired her, conservative groups suggested she, too, was fired for being too “woke” (Mitchell, 2025b).

Secretary Hegseth went on to dismiss other highly qualified female leaders, including Admiral Lisa Franchetti, and Lt Gen. Jennifer M. Short, a C-130 navigator, A-10 pilot, and Senior Military Assistant to the Defense Secretary (Baldor, 2025a; Aerospace Global News, 2025). Those terminated were replaced by white men whose greater merit was never justified, but instead assumed. For instance, many top leaders tout the now-fired Lt Gen Short’s resume as “fuller and more impressive” than both the recently ousted Chairmen of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, Gen CQ Brown, and his replacement John Caine, with Caine being described as a “pale and stale by comparison” nomination (Aerospace Global News, 2025).

To date, the administration has publicly dismissed nine senior uniformed leaders, eight of whom were from the Department of Defense. The ninth, from the Coast Guard, falls under the Department of Homeland Security (Watson, 2025). Of the eight terminated, only four were white males (50%). To put that into context, the last DoD demographics report shows that of the 815 active-duty officers ranked O-7 to O-10 (general officers and admirals), 90.7% were men (Department of Defense, 2024). So, while women make up only 9.3% of active duty’s most senior ranks, they represent 37.5% (3/8) of senior DoD leaders fired since January, and now zero percent of the remaining four-star (O-10) generals/admirals in the military (Toropin & Beynon, 2025).

**Policing of thought in the DoD Educational Institutions:** The administration’s stated priorities, actions, and orders have led to fear and concern as well as pressure at Military Academies and other DoD educational institutions. Citing concern that Academies had been “infiltrated by woke leftist ideologues over the last four years,” President Trump dismissed all four Military Academies’ Boards of Visitors—panels charged with providing advice and recommendations on Academy operations (Mitchell, 2025a). This changeover in leadership raises concerns that education at the Academies could become politicized to such an extent that true academic freedom will end.

Leadership changeovers, public statements about acceptable/unacceptable ideologies, and firings have set a stage of uncertainty and fear. Compounding those

pressures, unclear executive orders and DoD directives have mandated changes that may undermine academic diligence and shift from teaching people *how* to think (what Lt Gen Bauernfeind’s congressional testimony suggested his Academy is committed to) to teaching *what* to think. In the next section we provide specific language from Executive Orders and DoD directives that outline how teachers across the DoD must teach on topics of race, sex, history, and climate concern. Such censorship disregards DoD directives aimed at developing a core group of innovative leaders who can think critically. Further, they clearly require faculty to teach *what* to think, creating pressures on faculty to either avoid topics or to perpetuate mistruths.

### **Executive Orders and Secretary of Defense Memos Guiding Changes**

#### **Executive Order “Restoring America’s Fighting Force” (The White House, January 27, 2025)**

This executive order mandated that every DEI office within the Department of Defense be abolished, “including initiatives established to promote a race-based preferences system that subverts meritocracy, perpetuates unconstitutional discrimination, and promotes divisive concepts or gender ideology.”

Additionally, it prohibited “the Department of Defense and the Armed Forces, including any educational institution operated or controlled thereby” . . . “from promoting, advancing, or otherwise inculcating un-American, divisive, discriminatory, radical, extremist, and irrational theories.”

Further, it required the SECDEF to “carefully review the leadership, curriculum, and instructors of the United States Service Academies and other defense academic institutions associated with their respective Departments to ensure alignment with this order.” The order specified: “These institutions shall ***be required to teach*** [emphasis added] that America and its founding documents remain the most powerful force for good in human history.”

Reinforcing these mandates, SECDEF Hegseth’s January 29, 2025, memo specifically prohibited teaching about “Critical Race Theory (CRT), DEI, or gender

ideology as part of a curriculum or for purposes of workforce training” (Secretary of Defense, 2025). Oversight immediately followed with task force compliance visits to review admissions processes, “DEI” compliance, and promotion processes (Cohen, 2025). Academic and training institutions were explicitly targeted. Teams conducted thorough reviews at nine installations, examining curricula and documents, and carrying out interviews, classroom observations, and focus groups (Cohen, 2025).

**Executive Order “Defending Women From Gender Ideology Extremism”  
(The White House, January 20, 2025)**

This order mandated that across the federal government (which includes all DoD educational institutions), the term “‘Sex’ shall refer to an individual’s immutable biological classification as either male or female,” and that terms typically used to describe gender (e.g., woman, girl, man, boy) will now be used to refer to adult and juvenile human females and males as determined biologically at birth.

The Order goes on to define and prohibit the concepts “gender ideology” (“the idea that there is a vast spectrum of genders that are disconnected from one’s sex”) and “gender identity” (“a fully internal and subjective sense of self, disconnected from biological reality and sex and existing on an infinite continuum, that does not provide a meaningful basis for identification and cannot be recognized as a replacement for sex”). Additionally, it mandates: “When administering or enforcing sex-based distinctions, every agency and all Federal employees acting in an official capacity on behalf of their agency shall use the term ‘sex’ and not ‘gender’ in all applicable Federal policies and documents.”

Reinforcing these mandates, SECDEF Hegseth’s Feb 26, 2025, memo stated: “The Department only recognizes two sexes: male and female. An individual’s sex is immutable, unchanging during a person’s life” (Office of the Under Secretary of Defense, 2025). The memo goes on to mandate that service members meet all military requirements (uniform, medical, berthing, bathroom, and grooming standards) of their sex at birth, and mandates that pronouns and salutations match service members’ sex.

Adding to the overall confusion around directives, this mandate promotes a disregard for well-established scientific distinctions between gender (a social and cultural construct) and sex (a biological characteristic; Torgrimson & Minson, 2005). Further, it dismisses the fact that gender and sex differences are standard topics in undergraduate and graduate classes and are often addressed in DoD human subjects research.

## **Implementation of Changes Across DoD Educational Institutions**

### **Methods**

Examples in this section were derived from faculty members and administrators serving across multiple uniformed education and training institutions. Specifically, we leveraged our networks to identify trusted informants serving at DoD educational institutions. Those contributors often pointed us to additional sources willing to speak on the condition of anonymity. Ultimately, we spoke directly with 17 people and received inputs from four additional verified contributors, resulting in a total of 21 individuals' inputs.

The institutions that contributors worked at included but were not limited to the Military Academy at West Point, the Naval Academy at Annapolis, the Air Force Academy at Colorado Springs, Air University, National Defense University, Navy Post-graduate School, three uniformed graduate medical programs, and a military medical residency program.

The primary setup and question we asked was: "Several executive orders and DoD memos have come out since January 20, 2025. Can you describe any changes you've experienced at your institution?" If able, we asked for specific examples of changes that contributors experienced at their institutions affecting resources, curriculum, research, academic freedom, and general workplace dynamics. We compared and contrasted examples iteratively to identify themes and inform subsequent interviews and evidence searches. We also sought and triangulated stories with verifiable evidence, such as screenshots of local messages, briefing slides, internal reports, and media articles. Examples in this article are intentionally limited in detail to

protect the identities of trusted contributors across the DoD who were willing to share their experiences for this piece.

### **Curriculum**

As previously noted, Superintendents from all three Service Academies testified before Congress in March 2025 that they completed comprehensive curricular reviews and took action based on those reviews (Shkolnikova, 2025). The Military Academy at West Point (Army) reviewed 600 courses and removed two: a history course titled “Race, Ethnicity and Nation” and an English course titled “Power and Difference.” Both were elective, non-mandatory courses with fairly low enrollment (12-25 students). The Naval Academy reviewed 870 courses, resulting in 18 identified as requiring minor adjustments to adhere to executive orders and two being eliminated: a leadership course titled “Gender Matters,” and an English course titled “Gender Sexuality Studies.” The Air Force Academy reviewed 735 courses and flagged 55 courses for further analysis, estimating that 53% of those courses will require minor changes to continue, and three may be suspended or cancelled (Shkolnikova, 2025).

Even before this testimony, the process of reviewing courses almost immediately affected cadets at the Military Academy at West Point and the Air Force Academy, as both schools cancelled their DEI-related minors (Miller, 2025). According to our faculty contributors, cancellations meant that cadets who earned DEI minors did not receive credit for earning those minors when they graduated. Further, no future cadets may earn DEI minors, and all courses associated with the minors underwent additional scrutiny. Professors who taught associated courses and who helped to administer the minors were required to complete curriculum reviews and reports, knowing the result of their reviews could mean cancelling their courses.

In uniformed medical graduate programs, faculty insiders advised us of varying effects. Some programs were minimally affected, at least based on the experience of the faculty member we spoke with. Other programs were braced to be affected, but national accrediting bodies of their medical professions leaned forward to reduce required content on health inequities nationally. This outside accrediting decision enabled the DoD programs to remove course content perceived as violating DEI

executive orders and remain accredited. The second order effect of this removal is that DoD graduate medical program students will complete their accredited programs with less awareness of and competence to address social determinates of health and associated health inequities compared to students graduating from non-DoD schools. Additionally, while several national accrediting bodies had already approved DoD's content removals at the time of our interviews, one institution leader we spoke with advised that their program was still awaiting a waiver and will lose accreditation if they are unable to secure it. This DoD graduate program serves as an accessions source for 50% of new recruits into a short-staffed, high-demand medical career field in the military. Thus, the effects of cancelling a course to comply with executive orders could result not only in loss of accreditation, but also in shortfalls across the DoD in this critical medical field.

Graduate-level defense institutions such as Air University, the National Defense University, the Naval War College, and the Naval Postgraduate School have also been impacted. These institutions play a critical role in preparing military and civilian leaders to address complex security challenges. Contributors advised us that several research grants—many of which are tied to federal agencies—have been dismantled, leading to the suspension of related projects. To illustrate, the Naval War College used to offer a degree in Climate Change and National Security, while the National Defense University used to offer courses on climate and environmental security, and historically conducted courses focused on gender security. Several courses are linked to Women, Peace, and Security (WPS) initiatives, a whole-of-government law signed by President Trump in 2017 (U.S. Congress, 2017). These initiatives, grounded in bipartisan legislation, were designed to inform defense strategies and urge consideration of gender/climate impacts on national security. The law is based upon NATO and UN studies that show “gender perspectives increase operational effectiveness” (Dharmapuri, 2013). Despite this evidence, curricula and entire programs across several defense graduate schools have been halted—ostensibly to “protect women” and “restore a fighting force.” This stands in stark contrast to the intent of the 2017 congressional law.

At institutions delivering professional military education, insiders reported that “all curriculum content that referenced diversity, equity and inclusion—including published

academic papers, articles and books—has been removed.” One informant went on to relay that “some of the military’s most competitive developmental programs—critical to preparing rising leaders—have undergone significant rebranding. Terminology such as ‘unconscious bias’ has been altered or removed entirely, and key DEI lessons have been revised to align with the current policy environment.” Finally, leadership preparation programs for commanders have been revised to exclude developmental theories addressing race, gender, sexual identity, and critical psychosocial, cognitive, and environmental factors—areas key to effectively mentor and lead young service members for military success.

In addition to concerns about negative impacts of curriculum changes, multiple contributors relayed feeling unsafe to continue any work that may be construed as “DEI.” They cited a chilling message received from the Office of Personnel Management (OPM) noting that leaders “are aware of efforts by some in government to disguise (DEI-related contracts) by using coded or imprecise language.” The message went on to say that “if members are aware of a change in contract description or personnel position description . . . to obscure the connection between the contract and DEIA or similar ideologies, report all facts and circumstances to email: [DEIAtruth@opm.gov](mailto:DEIAtruth@opm.gov) within 10 days.” An additional line stated: “There will be no adverse consequences for timely reporting of this information; however, failure to report this information within 10 days may result in adverse consequences” (U.S. Office of Personnel Management, 2025).

## Research

Threats to fire “woke” civilian faculty members have also resulted in a chilling effect on research. Unique to the DoD, all military members and federal civilians who wish to publish or speak about their research must request approval from Public Affairs offices. This has resulted in some faculty ceasing publishing and public speaking appearances out of fear their work might be interpreted as “woke,” and place a target on them. Complicating matters, faculty cannot be certain if their content is prohibited, as the executive orders and SECDEF memo target *teaching* in DoD settings, not research.

Vague executive orders and lack of clarity regarding if research is restricted create immediate challenges. Compounding those challenges, another order appears to restrict research *grants* related to DEI. Namely, the order “Ending Radical and Wasteful Government DEI Programs and Preferencing” reads: “Each agency, department . . . shall take the following actions: terminate, to the maximum extent allowed by law, all DEI, DEIA, and ‘environmental justice’ offices and positions . . . all ‘equity’ actions, initiatives, or programs, ‘equity-related’ grants or contracts” (The White House, 2025b). This edict has resulted in some faculty stopping all efforts to secure research grants that may be construed as “DEI” or “equity related.”

The combination of these factors—fear of being fired for being “woke” and lack of clarity around research and grant permissions/prohibitions—has left researchers uncertain if their past or future research is permitted. For example, faculty were uncertain if conducting research sampling transgender people was permitted given federal funding and official duty restrictions. They were also uncertain if they could continue research examining gender, race, age, and other demographic differences in health outcomes, promotion rates, leadership views, etc. Faculty contributors questioned if they were permitted to acknowledge gender theories driving their research questions (given requirements to use “sex” versus “gender”) and if they were permitted to note the differences between sex and gender in the body of their text—differences understood in science that may be relevant to understanding research strategies or limitations, but now potentially prohibited by executive orders.

The answer to these questions appears to be fractured at best, as some institutions and programs have made no major changes in their research approval practices, while others have restricted their faculty members from publishing or presenting research interpreted as potential violations of executive orders. The variations in implementation have resulted in confusion, frustration, and likely longer-term impacts on tenure packages as well as to important research aimed at enhancing national security. As a result of such challenges, several faculty have altogether resigned to offer their expertise to corporations domestic and foreign.

In one example provided, a military medical conference required legal review of any research submissions that could be interpreted as violating executive orders.

Ultimately, 16.7% of submissions were submitted to a military legal office for review and advisement. Of those, half were assessed as legally permitted with edits (e.g., use the term “sex” instead of “gender”). The other half were rejected, but the reasoning was unclear: Was the rejection based on the studies including transgender people in the broader sample? Or their use of a theory acknowledging impacts of oppression? Or their use of words such as “diversity” and “inclusion”? The legal review resulted in more questions beyond the (unclear) cause for rejection including: Are we allowed to acknowledge transgender populations at all? Is the legal opinion to not accept these submissions only because it was a military-led conference? Would military members or other DoD faculty be permitted to present the same work if it was at a civilian conference? In addition to providing insufficient information to inform future conference proposals/reviews, the legal memo specified speech restrictions, advising that all conference presenters refrain from using the words “diversity,” “equity,” “inclusion,” “transgender” and “gender” entirely during their presentations.

In another illustration, at a social science security symposium at West Point attended by defense researchers from around the world (including NATO, the UN, and the EU), several presentations dropped off the agenda, not due to any explicit violation, but rather due to uncertainty about potential professional consequences. Notably, security research is always directed at deterrence, strategic foresight, economic efficiency in war, and lethality. Each cancelled presentation related to national security—what the administration claims to be prioritizing. Again, lack of clarity and poor execution of commander’s intent hindered collective research efforts essential to our national security.

### **Academic Resources**

Despite Service Academies’ status as higher education institutions, which exempts them from executive orders targeting K-12 education, the Pentagon ordered library reviews after learning some “DEI” and climate related books remained in the Academies’ libraries (Baldor, 2025b). The Naval Academy’s Nimitz Library, the Air Force Academy’s McDermott Library, the Air University Library, and West Point’s Jefferson Library were all ordered to cull hundreds of books (Associated Press, 2025).

The libraries are reviewing inventories to remove books covering topics such as the Holocaust, the history of feminism, sexuality, civil rights, and racial issues. The Naval Academy was the first to purge books, with a mandated review that resulted in 381 books being removed (Media.defense.gov, 2025).

Books removed from the Naval Academy's Nimitz Library included textbooks on race, gender, and sexuality; fiction that explores the experiences of racial minorities (e.g., *The Hate U Give* by Angie Thomas); works on the experiences of minority veterans (e.g., *Half American: The Epic Story of African Americans Fighting WWII at Home and Abroad* by Matthew F. Delmont); books discussing transgender lives and challenges (e.g., *Transgender Rights and Politics* by Jami K. Taylor and Donald P. Haider-Markel); non-fiction accounts focused on Black lived experiences (e.g., *Through Our Eyes: African American Men's Experiences of Race, Gender and Violence* by Bridget A. Turner Kelly and Derrick R. Brooms); texts addressing the history and resurgence of white supremacy (e.g., *Ku Klux Kulture: America and the Klan in the 1920s* by Felix Harcourt); memoirs by non-white advocates (e.g., *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* by Maya Angelou); global narratives on resistance and rebuilding (e.g., *The Underground Girls of Kabul: In Search of a Hidden Resistance in Afghanistan* by Jenny Nordberg); analyses of Holocaust memory and its aftermath (e.g., *Memorializing the Holocaust: Gender, Genocide, and Collective Memory* by Janet Jacobs); and even Department of Defense-sponsored research (e.g., *Managing Diversity in the Military: Research Perspectives from the Defense Equal Opportunity Management Institute*, edited by James Stewart, Kimberly M. Dansby, and Schuyler Webb).

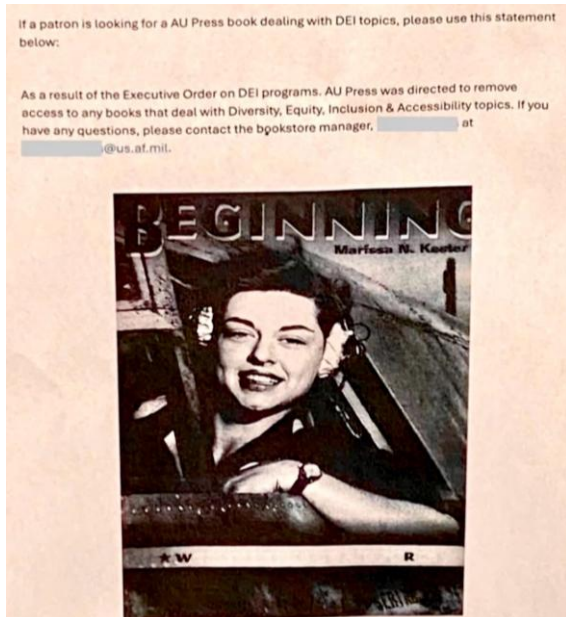
In addition to removed books, lectures and academic talks have been cancelled last minute. A notable example occurred in April, when author Ryan Holiday was scheduled to deliver a Stutt Lecture on the virtues of wisdom at the Naval Academy. His address was set to include a discussion on how Medal of Honor recipient and former POW John Stockdale drew on his understanding of Marxist ideology to endure his captivity in Vietnam. Stockdale's knowledge came from a book he checked out at Stanford University. But after military leaders learned that Holiday intended to tie his points to the book removals in Nimitz Library, his lecture was cancelled. The irony in the

cancellation is evident. His message argued that the pursuit of wisdom is impossible without engaging with and challenging uncomfortable ideas, emphasizing that military members “ought to read, like a spy in the enemy’s camp” (Holiday, 2025).

Multiple contributors advised us that the book bans at the Naval Academy are just the beginning. Currently other DoD entities, including other Service Academies, are using Artificial Intelligence to find and remove books they assess as prohibited by the administration. One DoD graduate medical school advised that books removed from their library were not made public, making it so that only when students or faculty requested a book would they learn it was banned. Others sent in pictures of “instructions” for library workers on how to handle patrons who requested books that had been removed for “DEI” (see Figure 1).

Figure 1.

*Instructions to library workers for dealing with requests for removed books*



### Common Spaces

Multiple DoD institutions advised us that “common areas” in their academic buildings underwent inspections to identify and remove any “artifacts” that may violate executive orders. Among items removed were photos or acknowledgements of women and minority members’ “firsts” (e.g., first woman awarded Medal of Honor), any banners

celebrating Black History Month or Women's History Month (even if not purchased with DoD funds, meaning banners did not technically violate executive orders), research posters that sampled non-male populations (e.g., a study that sampled Latina women), and Pride, Ally and Safe Space symbols displayed outside of faculty members' offices. Additionally, hundreds of biographies and features highlighting faculty members' expertise, education, and research focuses were removed based on interpretations they may violate directives or otherwise offend compliance teams.

These reviews were complicated by varying local interpretations of what violated executive orders and DoD directives. Most initial inspections and removals were driven by local level leaders, with expectations that areas would be rechecked by higher-level traveling compliance teams (Ceder, 2025). Contributors across multiple educational institutions reported frustration that guidance driving removals was not clear. Some faculty reported that they questioned why items were removed when they did not violate executive orders, but they were refused explanations. Additionally, faculty noted frustration in their interpretation that research was not restricted by executive orders or memos on DEI, gender ideology, and climate change, but was being removed regardless. Rumblings across different DoD entities and local rumors fueled contributors' expectations that artifact removal will progress beyond these initial common area inspections into individual offices, resulting in a sense that academic and personal freedoms will continue to be eroded.

## **Conclusion**

We began this paper by noting that the Superintendent at the Air Force Academy responded to a question from the Senate Committee on Armed Services that his Academy is "delving in hard on teaching our future leaders *how* to think and not *what* to think." This is a worthy aspiration for all the Military Service Academies, as well as all the other educational institutions within the Department of Defense. Unfortunately, the evidence suggests that this aspiration is being methodically undone. The implementation of recent Executive Orders and SECDEF directives have placed an overt emphasis specifically on what to think (and, perhaps more pointedly, what not to think). The elimination of courses and programs, the halts placed on scholarly research,

the purges of books and other educational materials, and the removal of artifacts deemed to be “DEI-related” are all focused on what our military personnel are *allowed* to think. As such, they are antithetical to the stated ideals of DoD educational institutions and to the ideals of educational institutions in general.

Tragically, the effects of these changes will not just be felt by those people currently aligned with DoD educational institutions. Instead, they are likely to have negative impacts on military effectiveness for decades to come. Despite the administration’s focus on “restoring lethality,” the United States has never lost a war due to a lack of lethality. Our ability to project overwhelming force remains unparalleled. However, lethality by itself is not sufficient for achieving lasting strategic success. Time and again—from Vietnam to Iraq and Afghanistan—lethal victories have failed to yield durable outcomes, largely because of a lack of ability to think critically and analyze ambiguous situations. These failures have led to misreading cultural signals and neglecting how local power dynamics were undermining lasting stability efforts, just as they did in Iraq and Afghanistan. The realities behind our recent strategic defense failures highlight that the skills our military needs most—critical thinking and awareness of diverse viewpoints—are at the greatest risk by this administration’s approach.

We are already seeing the devastating impacts. Talented faculty members have already started to resign from the service academies, recognizing that teaching positions at DoD institutions are no longer aligned with the values of higher education (Ismay, 2025; Shinn, 2025). Meanwhile, talented students are also likely to leave (or never choose to attend in the first place), recognizing that they can receive a more credible education elsewhere. An informant serving as a reviewing official for disenrollments at one U.S. Service Academy reported that the number of students who voluntarily disenrolled February to May 2025 was 2.2 times higher than the number of students who disenrolled that same period in 2024. Based on conversations with voluntarily disenrolling students, the contributor attributed the spike to recent administration changes (POTUS and SECDEF) and local leaders’ implementation of new DoD policies and priorities. In a time of rapid change, the last thing the military can afford is a brain drain within its future leadership ranks.

For those who remain, the chilling effect on research will almost certainly have lasting downstream effects. Contributors for this piece were clear: Research that prioritizes the human aspects of warfighting—where social factors are integrated into military considerations—has been largely shut down. Cutting research in these critical areas will not make us a more lethal and capable force. Instead, the true winners in this approach will be our competitors and adversaries, who will continue to leverage an in-depth understanding of human behavior and culture to exploit populations and undermine U.S. defense priorities. Two examples of terrorist organizations and other adversaries leveraging social science research to exploit vulnerable populations are the strategic recruitment of women into guerrilla units, combat units, and decision-making spaces (Cohen & Karim, 2022), and the conversion of young secular men into radical factions (Borum, 2004). Prohibitions against teaching and research that help us understand and effectively respond to such approaches put our country at tremendous strategic risk.

The United States needs military members who know how to think critically. Mandates on what to think (and what not to think) put us at a disadvantage. They are already causing us to lose talent and strategic capabilities. Ultimately, they will cause us to lose our nation's future wars.



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