

Trump announces ban on transgender people in the US military

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In a series of tweets Wednesday morning, President Donald Trump announced that transgender people will not be allowed “to serve in any capacity in the U.S. Military.” The announcement reverses moves initiated by then-Defense Secretary Ashton Carter in 2016 to allow transgender soldiers to serve openly.

The move to expel transgender soldiers from the military is anti-democratic and oriented toward stoking up the most backward and fascistic elements. Moreover, it has ominous implications for transgender people in other aspects of society, legitimizing discrimination in jobs, education and access to services.

In June, Defense Secretary James Mattis delayed by six months a decision on whether and how to accept new transgender recruits into the military. At the time, Mattis said that the delay “in no way presupposes the outcome.” Trump’s announcement appears to preclude openly transgender people from joining at all, and puts the status of currently serving transgender soldiers in jeopardy.

Trump’s tweets link the anti-democratic decision to military and bogus financial considerations: “Our military must be focused on decisive and overwhelming victory and cannot be burdened with the tremendous medical costs and disruption that transgender in the military [sic] would entail.”

This statement contradicts the findings of a RAND Corporation study commissioned by the Department of Defense, which found that “the costs of gender transition-related health care treatment are relatively low.”

According to the study, there are an estimated 2,450 active-duty transgender soldiers, with another 1,510 in the reserves, a subset of whom would seek health care related to transitioning. The RAND Corporation predicted a health care increase of only \$2.4-8.4 million

annually, which would represent at most a “0.13-percent increase in active-component health care expenditures.”

A *Military Times* report from 2015 notes that the Department of Defense spends some \$84 million annually on drugs to treat erectile dysfunction, or 10 times the maximum expected annual expenditure on health care costs associated with transgender soldiers receiving gender transition-related medical care.

Trump’s surprise announcement may reflect tensions within his administration. The Pentagon seemed blindsided by the move. Mattis is on vacation this week, and Pentagon officials are referring the press to the White House for comment. When asked during his confirmation hearing in January about LGBT (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender) Americans serving in the military, Mattis replied, “Frankly, senator, I’ve never cared much about two consenting adults and who they go to bed with.”

During his presidential campaign, Trump invited prominent transgender woman Caitlyn Jenner to use the bathroom corresponding to her gender identity at Trump Tower and cynically used the Pulse nightclub shooting in Orlando, Florida to pose as a defender of gay rights against Islamic extremism. He tweeted shortly after the shooting: “Thank you to the LGBT community! I will fight for you while Hillary [Clinton] brings in more people that will threaten your freedoms and beliefs.”

After taking office, however, the Trump administration has stoked up the most backward sentiments, including by revoking an Obama administration guidance to allow transgender students to use the bathroom that corresponds to their gender identity. Breitbart News, the clearinghouse of the fascistic “alt-right,” has spearheaded the campaign

against “transgender ideology.”

In addition to stoking up the most reactionary impulses in American society, including transphobia, Trump’s tweets appear to be motivated by crass political considerations. *Politico* reports that House Republicans have been feuding over whether to ban the Pentagon from funding transition-related health costs for transgender military personnel. This internecine fight threatened to derail a spending bill containing many of Trump’s campaign promises, including funding for the wall on the US-Mexico border.

Politico reports that House Republicans appealed to Mattis to intervene, and after he refused appealed to Trump. Trump’s announcement—not allowing transgender soldiers in the military at all—precludes the military from paying for active-duty soldiers to receive health care related to transitioning. One senior House Republican aide told *Politico*, “This is like someone told the White House to light a candle on the table and the [White House] set the whole table on fire.”

LGBT rights activists condemned the decision as bigoted and anti-democratic, and vowed to challenge the decision in court. OutServe-Servicemembers Legal Defense Network, which opposed the Clinton administration’s homophobic “Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell” policy, said it would “tak[e] the fight to Donald Trump in the federal court.”

The Democrats’ criticism of Trump’s transphobic move is entirely hypocritical and aimed at stoking nationalism, while seeking to give the US military a “progressive” gloss. Representative Adam Smith of Washington, the ranking Democrat on the House Armed Services Committee, called the new policy “an unwarranted and disgraceful attack on men and women who have been bravely serving their country.”

In a November 2016 interview with the Council on Foreign Relations, Smith said that instead of focusing on Clinton’s potential mishandling of classified information via email, people should worry about whistleblowers Edward Snowden and Chelsea Manning. Manning, a transgender woman, was at the time being psychologically tortured in a military prison and denied access to gender reassignment surgery for her bravery in exposing the crimes of US imperialism.

Defending the rights of transgender people and other minority groups—as well as other democratic rights such as freedom of speech and freedom from warrantless

search and seizure—is a class question. A genuine struggle against discrimination and in defense of democratic rights can only be conducted based on the independent political mobilization of the working class on a socialist—and therefore anti-imperialist—program.



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