



July 28, 2017

No Justification: Donald Trump's Transgender Military Ban is a Cruel Solution in Search of a Problem

By Jared Genser

In an unexpected flurry of tweets earlier this week, President Trump announced he was reinstating a ban on transgender people serving in the military that had previously been lifted by President Obama. He justified his decision by explaining the U.S. military “can’t be burdened with the tremendous medical costs and disruption that transgender in the military would entail.”

Defense Secretary Jim Mattis said he had been given one day’s notice of the policy change, while eight other defense officials noted that they had no idea what would happen to the transgender people already serving in the military. But putting aside what Senate Armed Services Committee Chairman John McCain described as “an example of why major policy announcements should not be made via Twitter,” the policy in question here is on the wrong side of history.

The new Trump policy on banning transgender people from the military is a solution to a problem that does not exist. It also sure looks like a cheap political ploy to incite a culture war by scapegoating a vulnerable population. This decision is just a higher-profile version of the “bathroom bills” that would require transgender people to use the bathroom that doesn’t align with their gender identity to outrage the public and create a new “other” to rally against. When studies show that almost 50 percent of transgender youth have considered suicide, Americans should be supporting their transgender neighbors and relatives, not demonizing them. Through this policy, Trump is labeling transgender people a burden. The facts don’t bear this out. This policy must be reversed.

Trump's two key justifications for his decision are great examples of what on other topics he would usually decry as "fake news."

First, Trump claimed there are tremendous medical costs. It is important to appreciate the context for the announcement. Earlier this month, the House of Representatives voted 209-214, with 24 Republicans joining Democrats, to defeat an amendment offered by Rep. Vicky Hartzler (R-Missouri) that would have banned the Pentagon from paying for gender reassignment surgeries. Hartzler had claimed these surgeries would have cost up to \$3.7 billion over 10 years. It appears Trump must have heard about the exorbitant cost and reflexively thought it was a waste of money.

But where did these gigantic numbers come from? Hartzler pointed to a four-page "issue brief" from the Family Research Council that was published by a Baptist minister. To be clear, ministers are just as entitled to express their views as anyone else, but for Trump to make military policy on the basis of a minister's financial calculations would be extraordinary.

In fact, after Obama reversed the ban on transgender people serving in the military, the Pentagon itself commissioned the RAND Corporation to research and publish a comprehensive study on the implications of that decision on health care costs, troop readiness, and deployability. Published last year, it concluded there were likely around 2,500 transgender personnel in the military of 1.3 million in active duty and some 1,500 in the reserves. It estimated that the annual costs would increase between \$2.4 to 8.4 million of a \$6.2 billion health care budget for the military annually, representing 0.04 to 0.13 percent increase in health care expenditures. For some perspective on the cost, the *Military Times* reported that the military spends \$84.2 million annually on Viagra for the troops.

There is no credible argument that maintaining Obama's policy allowing transgender people to serve in the military will have anything more than the most miniscule impact on the U.S. military budget.

Second, Trump argues that the service of transgender people in the military would cause "disruption" to the military. Not only are transgender people less than two-tenths of one percent of those on active duty, they have been serving with distinction in the U.S. military for decades. Consider the example of Kristen Beck, a 20-year veteran of the Navy SEALs, who was awarded a Bronze Star for valor and Purple Heart for wounds suffered in combat, and ultimately served in the elite SEAL Team 6. In a powerful rebuke to Trump's announcement, she declared, "Let's meet face to face and you tell me I'm not worthy."

The RAND study reported that 18 countries in the world already allow for open service of transgender people, including major militaries such as the Australia, Germany, Israel, and the United Kingdom. While there is limited research available, RAND concluded “the available evidence indicated no significant effect on cohesion, operational effectiveness, or readiness.”

When Donald Trump was running for President in June 2016, he gave a powerful speech after the massacre of 49 people at the Pulse gay nightclub in Orlando. “Ask yourself who is really the friend of ... the LGBT community,” he said. “Donald Trump with actions, or Hillary Clinton with her words?” He then added: “I will tell you who the better friend is and someday I believe that will be proven out bigly.”

Mr. President, you can live up to your promise by reversing your decision and continuing to allow transgender people to serve with equal distinction in the U.S. military alongside all other service members.

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