

Trump announces ban on transgender people in U.S. military

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By Abby Phillip, Thomas Gibbons-Neff and Dan Lamothe 6 days ago

President Trump said he will ban transgender people from serving in the military in any capacity, a reversal of the Obama administration decision that would have allowed them to serve, he announced on social media on Wednesday.

Citing the need to focus on victory, Trump said that the military cannot accept the burden of higher medical costs and “disruption” that transgender troops would require.

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“After consultation with my Generals and military experts, please be advised that the United States Government will not accept or allow transgender individuals to serve in any capacity in the U.S. Military,” Trump wrote on Twitter. “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 would entail.”

The missive comes after Trump's defense secretary, retired Gen. Jim Mattis, delayed the implementation of the plan to accept transgender troops by six months. The decision came one day before the deadline for the military to update its medical standards to accommodate transgender service members.

The six-month delay was requested by the Joint Chiefs of Staff and would allow a further review of how allowing transgender recruits to serve would affect the military's lethality, Mattis said in a memo. That review was due by early December.

Mattis cautioned at the time that the delay “in no way presupposes the outcome.”

“Since becoming the Secretary of Defense, I have emphasized that the Department of Defense must measure each policy decision against one critical standard: will the decision affect the readiness and lethality of the force?” Mattis said last month in a statement. “Put another way, how will the decision affect the ability of America's military to defend the nation? It is against this standard that I provide the following guidance on the way forward in accessing transgender individuals into the military Services.”



© Alex Brandon/AP President Trump ducks his head as he steps off Marine One after arriving on the South Lawn of the White House, on Tuesday.

The Pentagon referred all questions about Trump's announcement to the White House.

“We will continue to work closely with the White House to address the new guidance provided by the Commander-in-Chief on transgender individuals serving the military,” said Pentagon spokesman Navy Capt. Jeff Davis. “We will provide revised guidance to the Department in the near future.”

Under Defense Secretary Ashton B. Carter, the military lifted the ban on transgender troops and was given one year to determine how to implement a policy that would allow transgender service members to receive medical care and would ban the services from involuntarily separating people in the military who came out as transgender.

Thousands of troops currently serving in the military are transgender, and some estimates place the number as high as 11,000 in the reserves and active duty military, according to a Rand Corp. study commissioned by the Defense Department.

Brad Carson, a former congressman who worked on transgender policy deliberations under the Obama administration, said in an interview Wednesday that months of delays last year in implementing a change in transgender policy “left the door open” to Trump's scrutiny now.

“That being said, just from the tweets it seems as if what he is doing is rolling back already implemented policies, which will force out several hundred openly transgender service members out of the military,” Carson said. “This will be personal tragedy for them, but it will be a professional loss for the military, and it's going to invite litigation that will distract the Department of Defense for months, if not years, to come.”

Carson predicted that the courts ultimately could have a larger hand now in deciding transgender policy in the military, and that the Pentagon could lose some of its say in how to implement it in the process.

Carson said he is unclear who is driving Trump's decision. While the president tweeted Wednesday that the Joint Chiefs of Staff were involved, Carson said he talked to “every single chief” while he was working on transgender policy and none of them was in favor of a full ban.

“I said, 'Here's the threshold question: Do you want to separate transgender service members? Do you want to do that?' And every single one of them said no,” Carson said. “Now, maybe we can disagree about the fine points of accession policy or what kind of health care is provided, but that question of whether we should be separating able, competently serving service members, every single one of them said no.”

Trump tweeted about the issue during a week in which the Pentagon policy offices were expected to be slow. Davis, a Pentagon spokesman, told reporters Monday that Mattis was on personal travel this week, and only weighing in on issues occasionally when needed.

As a political candidate, Trump largely avoided issues related to lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender rights, even while many in his family — including daughter Ivanka Trump — have been vocal supporters of LGBT people. But since taking office, the Trump administration has rolled back a number of protections, including those for transgender schoolchildren. The White House also did not recognize LGBT Pride Month in June, although other members of his administration did so, including Secretary of State Rex Tillerson and Ivanka Trump.

Following Mattis's announcement last month, Aaron Belkin, director of the Palm Center, a think tank that has helped the Pentagon research transgender people serving in the military, released a statement condemning the move.

“For the past year, transgender troops have been serving openly and have been widely praised by their Commanders, as is the case in 18 allied militaries around the world including Israel and Britain,” Belkin said. “Yet members of Congress are denigrating the value of military service by

transgender troops, and Service Chiefs are pressuring Secretary Mattis to continue the transgender enlistment ban despite having no new arguments or data to back up their long-discredited assertions.

“In light of the success of transgender military service, the extensive research confirming that inclusive policy promotes readiness, and the sad history of ‘don't ask, don't tell,’ loyally-serving transgender troops deserve to know whether Secretary Mattis stands by the claim he made at his confirmation hearing that LGBT troops can indeed serve in a ‘lethal’ military. Stonewalling on full inclusion will, just like ‘don't ask, don't tell,’ compromise military readiness.”

Richard Socarides, a longtime gay rights advocate who advised Bill Clinton on gay men and lesbians serving in uniform, called Trump's decision “a tragic betrayal of all LGBT Americans and a shameful effort to win over social conservatives at the expense of the vulnerable.”

“But, what Trump will now learn: Don't mess with us,” Socarides said. “This gets him a fight he will not win.”

Gay rights and transgender organizations have long threatened legal action against the Pentagon if it decided to roll back or hinder the service of transgender troops. Their legal and political advocacy successfully convinced Congress and President Barack Obama to repeal the Clinton-era “Don't ask, don't tell” ban on gay troops through legislation.

Trump's announcement comes two weeks after the House rejected an amendment to the annual defense policy bill that would have blocked the Pentagon from offering gender transition therapies to active duty service members. Twenty-four Republicans joined all 190 Democrats voting to reject the measure.

But the issue has remained a pet cause for House conservatives who believe the federal government should not be funding gender reassignments. Conservatives have offered several amendments to a pending appropriations bill funding the military that would target transgender service members. But not would exclude them from serving entirely.

During the debate on the initial amendment, Rep. Duncan D. Hunter (R-Calif.), a member of the House Armed Services Committee, argued for the therapy restriction but explicitly stopped short of calling for an overall ban: “We're not stopping transgender people from joining. We're saying taxpayers in this country right now are not going to foot the bill for it.”

Ed O'Keefe, Jenna Johnson and Mike DeBonis contributed to this report.