

July 2, 2026

The Honorable Mike Johnson
Speaker
568 Cannon House Office Building
Washington, D.C. 20515

The Honorable Hakeem Jeffries
Minority Leader
2433 Rayburn House Office Building
Washington, D.C. 20515

The Honorable John Thune
Majority Leader, U.S. Senate
511 Hart Senate Office Building
Washington, D.C. 20510

The Honorable Chuck Schumer
Minority Leader, U.S. Senate
322 Hart Senate Office Building
Washington, D.C. 20510

Chair Roger Wicker
U.S. Senate Committee on Armed Services
228 Russell Senate Office Building
Washington, D.C. 20510

Ranking Member Jack Reed
U.S. Senate Committee on Armed Services
228 Russell Senate Office Building
Washington, D.C. 20510

Chair Mike Rogers
House Committee on Armed Services
2216 Rayburn House Office Building
Washington, D.C. 20515

Ranking Member Adam Smith
House Committee on Armed Services
2216 Rayburn House Office Building
Washington, D.C. 20515

Dear Leader Thune, Leader Schumer, Speaker Johnson, Leader Jeffries, Chair Wicker, Ranking Member Reed, Chair Rogers, and Ranking Member Smith:

As you work to prepare the House and Senate versions of the Fiscal Year 2027 National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA), we—the undersigned civil rights, veterans, and military service organizations—urge you to ensure this year’s NDAA protects equal opportunity in our military, upholds the dignity of all who serve, and guarantees that our armed forces can continue to draw strength from the talents, skills, and hard work of people of all backgrounds. And we urge you, with equal conviction, to reject any provision that seeks to undermine these principles or create new barriers for qualified people of all backgrounds seeking to serve this nation.

For generations, people of every race, religion, gender, sexual orientation, gender identity, and background have answered the call to serve—often defending freedoms their own country had not yet fully extended to them. Their service has strengthened our military, expanded opportunity, and moved the country closer to its highest ideals. Then as now, the military’s ability to draw on the talents of Americans from every background is a source of strength—helping recruit top talent, retain experienced service members, build cohesive units, and improve readiness.¹ As 35 former

¹ U.S. Dep’t of Def., *Diversity, Equity, Inclusion, and Accessibility Strategic Plan* (Aug. 2024), <https://www.dailysignal.com/wp-content/uploads/2024/08/DEPARTMENT-OF-DEFENSE-DIVERSITY-EQUITYINCLUSION-AND-ACCESSIBILITY-STRATEGIC-PLAN.pdf> ("Leveraging this strategic diversity and expanding access to attract, retain, and advance the best talent our nation has to offer are the only way DoD will be able to outthink, outmaneuver, and outfight any adversary or threat.").

senior military leaders have emphasized, “units that are diverse across all levels are more cohesive, collaborative, and effective.”² Achieving that cohesion and effectiveness requires ensuring that all who are qualified to serve feel welcome, respected, and supported in the ranks.

Today, however, that principle is under direct assault. Secretary Hegseth has pushed out qualified Black and female senior leaders and officers; issued a blanket policy discharging thousands of transgender service members simply for their gender identity; dismantled equal opportunity initiatives; reduced the number of religious and nonreligious affiliations recognized in military personnel records; and removed or minimized recognition of trailblazing Black, Latino, Native American, Asian American, women, and LGBTQ+ service members while restoring tributes to Confederate soldiers.³ He recently intervened in the Navy’s merit-based promotion process to block nine officers—including women and Black service members—who had been selected by a board of senior admirals. He took similar action with respect to women and Black officers on the Army’s promotion list for one-star generals.⁴ Congress reinforced and accelerated this retreat through last year’s NDAA, which codified the administration’s elimination of diversity offices and programs, gutted equal opportunity protections for women, LGBTQ+ individuals, and people of color, and restricted collection of certain race and gender data needed to ensure fairness and equal opportunity.⁵ These actions are harmful and counterproductive, especially as many service members from underrepresented communities face heightened hostility despite their patriotism.⁶

² Brief of Adm. Charles S. Abbot et al. as Amici Curiae Supporting Respondents, *Students for Fair Admissions, Inc. v. President & Fellows of Harvard Coll.*, Nos. 20-1199 & 21-707 (U.S. Aug. 1, 2022), <https://www.harvard.edu/admissionscase/wp-content/uploads/sites/6/2022/08/Amicus-Brief-Military-Brief72.pdf>.

³ See Richard Luscombe et al. *Pete Hegseth Removes All Women and Some Black Service Members from Navy Promotion List*, Guardian (June 3, 2026), <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2026/jun/03/pete-hegseth-navy-promotion-list>; John Ismay et al. *Pentagon Cuts 180 Religious Identities From Military Personnel Records*, N.Y. Times (June 5, 2026), <https://www.nytimes.com/2026/06/05/us/pentagon-religions-faith-military.html>; C. Todd Lopez, DOD Issues Implementation Guidance on Separation of Service Members With Gender Dysphoria, U.S. Dep’t of War (May 16, 2025), <https://www.war.gov/News/News-Stories/Article/Article/4188279/dod-issues-implementation-guidance-on-separation-of-service-members-with-gender/>; Tara Copp et al. *War Heroes, Military Firsts and the Enola Gay Are Among 26,000 Pentagon Images Flagged for Removal in DEI Purge*, AP News (Mar. 7, 2025), <https://apnews.com/article/dei-purge-images-pentagon-diversity-women-black-8efcfaec909954f4a24bad0d49c78074>; Jay Price, *Pete Hegseth Restoring Names of Army Bases First Named After Confederate Generals*, NPR (July 3, 2025), <https://www.npr.org/2025/07/03/nx-s1-5452495/pete-hegseth-restoring-names-of-army-bases-first-named-after-confederate-generals>.

⁴ Greg Jaffe & Kate Kelly, *Hegseth Strikes Female and Black Navy Officers From Promotion List*, N.Y. Times (June 1, 2026), <https://www.nytimes.com/2026/06/01/us/politics/hegseth-navy-promotion-list.html>

⁵ National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2026, Pub. L. No. 119-60 (2025); see also Southern Poverty Law Center, Legal Defense Fund & National Women’s Law Center Action Fund, *Coalition Letter Opposing Anti-Opportunity Riders in FY26 NDAA* (Oct. 23, 2025), <https://www.splcenter.org/resources/policies/coalition-letter-opposing-anti-opportunity-riders-in-fy26-ndaa/>

⁶ Blue Star Families, *The Diverse Experiences of Military & Veteran Families of Color* 24, 32–33 (Feb. 2022), https://bluestarfam.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/02/BSF_MFC_REI_FullReport2021-final.pdf (finding that nearly one in three service members of color reported racial or ethnic harassment and that discrimination affects decisions about whether to remain in uniform); see also Clint Smith, *Being Black in Pete Hegseth’s Military*, The Atlantic (July 2026), <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/2026/07/black-military-patriots-hegseth/687306/>.

They send a damaging message about who belongs, whose service is valued, and whether qualified people of all backgrounds will be supported in uniform.

Congress should not allow this to continue. In order for our nation's military to be effective, it cannot exclude or devalue individuals who are willing to serve their country at great personal sacrifice because of their race, gender, sex, sexual orientation, gender identity, or other characteristics. Abandoning that commitment to fair treatment betrays the service members of every background who have fought, sacrificed, and served to defend our nation. Those who wear the uniform do not surrender their right to be treated with dignity and fairness, and Congress must not surrender its duty to protect that right.

We therefore urge you to ensure the FY27 NDAA affirms equal opportunity as a core commitment of the military and rejects any effort to weaken the Department's ability to recruit, retain, train, and advance a force of talented individuals that reflects the nation it serves. Our country—and those who have served and continue to serve it with honor—deserve nothing less.

Sincerely,

Southern Poverty Law Center
National Women's Law Center Action Fund
Legal Defense Fund
Minority Veterans of America
Advocates for Trans Equality (A4TE)
The African American Policy Forum
AFT: Education, Healthcare, Public Services
American Association of University Women (AAUW)
American Atheists
American Civil Liberties Union
Asian Americans Advancing Justice | AAJC
Bend the Arc: Jewish Action
Black Veterans Project
CenterLink
Chamberlain Network
Clearinghouse on Women's Issues
Coalition on Human Needs
Common Defense
Equal Rights Advocates
Equality California
Feminist Majority
Garden State Equality Action Fund
Houston Immigration Legal Services Collaborative
Human Rights Campaign
Impact Fund
Interfaith Center on Corporate Responsibility
LatinoJustice PRLDEF
The Leadership Conference on Civil and Human Rights

League of United Latin American Citizens (LULAC)
Movement Advancement Project
National Council of Jewish Women
National LGBTQ Task Force Action Fund
National LGBTQ+ Bar Association
National Organization for Women, Columbia Area
National Organization for Women, Missouri
National Partnership for Women & Families
National Security Leaders for America
National Urban League
Not In My Marine Corps
Repatriate Our Patriots
Reproductive Freedom for All
Right To Be
Rocky Mountain Equality
Service Women's Action Network (SWAN)
Silver State Equality
SPARTA Pride
The Trevor Project
Union for Reform Judaism
Vet Voice Foundation
Women in the Service Coalition, Inc. (WiSCI)
Women Lawyers On Guard Action Network
Women of Reform Judaism