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# Army Cautiously Jabbing Back as GOP Chastises Military as 'Woke'



Secretary of the U.S. Army Christine E. Wormuth gives her remarks during the cake-cutting ceremony in celebration of the 248th Army Birthday at the Pentagon auditorium in Arlington, Virginia, June 14, 2023. (U.S. Army photo by Bernardo Fuller)

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Military.com | By Steve Beynon

Once sacrosanct, the military has increasingly become a political punching bag in Washington, D.C., but the country's largest service has lately started taking some swings of its own.

"We are a ready Army, not a 'woke' Army," [Army](#) Secretary Christine Wormuth told reporters Tuesday. "What I'm trying to talk about now is how that drip, drip, drip of criticism about a woke military is having some counterproductive effects on [recruiting](#)."






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The services have come under near constant attacks on Capitol Hill over the past year, with Republican lawmakers claiming the military is getting soft due to its embrace of racial minorities, women and LGBTQ+ troops. The criticism comes at a particularly sensitive time for the Army, which had its worst recruiting year in decades in 2022.

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Lawmakers blamed the "woke" policies of the Biden administration. In reality, the recruiting slump has largely been attributable to a relatively healthy civilian job market and difficulty in finding young Americans who meet the academic and body fat standards to join.

The criticisms became mainstream when Joe Biden became president, though there have been no substantial changes to diversity or equality training in the services since the Trump administration.

The added burden of political attacks amid tough recruiting times has caused frustration among Army leadership.

"This was the kind of politicization in which you're not using the military social esteem to make yourself look better, you're trying to batter it and use it as a wedge point," Risa Brooks, a professor of political science at Marquette University, told Military.com.

Wormuth made similar comments in recent weeks during interviews on MSNBC's "Morning Joe" and "The Brian Lehrer Show" on New York City public radio.

In a response to questioning from Rep. Mike Waltz, R-Fla., on whether the military is being politicized during a congressional hearing in March, Sergeant Major of the Army Michael Grinston told him that his comments were contributing to that politicization.

"I think even by your comments, 'Are we politicizing the military,' it almost feels like we're politicizing the military," said Grinston, the Army's top enlisted leader. "We support and defend the nation and the Constitution [for] everybody. ... That's what good soldiers do."

A soldier in basic training receives only an hour of instruction related to equal opportunity -- a briefing that centers around treating service members of all backgrounds the same, according to service data.

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Meanwhile, new recruits receive about 92 hours of weapons training, and that significant volume of instruction is even longer for combat-arms trainees such as infantrymen.

The Army has had to walk a tightrope on countering the woke narrative, which has roots in the election of 2016 and the presidency of Donald Trump. The military has always, ideally, considered itself as apolitical and often struggles to stay out of political debates.

But lawmakers on both sides of the aisle also used to steer clear of sustained political broadsides on military culture. In 2015, that began to change amid Trump's ongoing feud with the late Arizona Sen. John McCain, a Vietnam veteran and former prisoner of war.

"He's not a war hero," [Trump said at the time](#). "He was a war hero because he was captured. I like people who weren't captured."

The latest accusations of wokeness seldom come with specifics, but have bled out of committee rooms on Capitol Hill to the campaign trail for the 2024 presidential race.

Florida Gov. Ron DeSantis, who has made [the military a key component](#) of his campaign criticisms, vowed that if elected he will revert base names, such as Fort Liberty, North Carolina, back to namesakes honoring Confederates who waged war against the U.S.

"I think the military that I see is different from the military I served in," DeSantis [told Fox News in May](#). "I see a lot of emphasis now on political ideologies, things like gender pronouns. I see a lot about things like DEI [diversity, equity and inclusion programs], and I think that that's caused recruiting to plummet."

But some in the Army see that as a brazen attack on soldiers as the service has become more welcoming to minorities and historically marginalized groups. However, that wider acceptance is less attributed to policy and generally associated with a more tolerant, younger generation.

"It's damned if you do, damned if you don't," one service official told Military.com on the condition of anonymity. "The fear is if that line is actually crossed, it gets us in a political fight."

Also, service officials including Wormuth say they believe the woke criticism has an impact on recruiting.

The prime demographic for recruiting, Gen Z, is more socially inclusive. But officials worry the woke narrative appeals to older people who are in the orbit of

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potential applicants, such as pastors, parents and school officials, who may have an outsized influence on decisions to enlist or not.

Wormuth, along with [Air Force](#) Secretary Frank Kendall and [Navy](#) Secretary Carlos Del Toro, [penned an op-ed for The Wall Street Journal](#) in October that was a call to arms highlighting that people with diverse backgrounds are welcome to serve.

But there was also a more subtle intent to publish the piece in a news outlet known to have an older audience -- those who may influence the younger pool of potential recruits, not the young Americans themselves.

DeSantis, who bashed the scrubbing of Confederate names from bases, went on to claim that troops currently serving are leaving.

However, [the Army has met its retention goals for the past four years](#), holding onto 50,000 to 60,000 soldiers whose contracts were expiring. It hit its goal this year in May.

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