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# Defense Secretary Orders No Drag Shows on Military Bases After Political Furor



The welcome sign on display at Ramstein Air Base, Germany, Sept. 2, 2021. (U.S. Air Force photo by Airman Edgar Grimaldo)

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Military.com | By [Rebecca Kheel](#) and [Thomas Novelly](#)

A Defense Department-wide prohibition on drag shows on military bases has resulted in the cancellation of at least two events that were planned for Pride Month and previously approved by base officials, two defense officials confirmed to Military.com.

Shows at [Nellis Air Force Base](#) in Nevada and [Ramstein Air Base](#) in Germany scheduled for this month were canceled, participants and defense officials






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confirmed. The two officials told Military.com the cancellations were part of a direction from Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin that drag shows, which have become a target of the political right, not be hosted on bases.

The show at Nellis, the cancellation of which was first reported by NBC News, drew intense criticism from GOP politicians in recent weeks, including a letter conservative firebrand Rep. Matt Gaetz, R-Fla., sent to Austin calling the event an "outright attack on children." While a drag event at Ramstein last year faced similar attacks, the event this year had flown under the radar and the base's LGBT community had been eagerly anticipating a celebratory Pride Month.

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"We're celebrating that we get to survive," Lane Fox, a member of the drag troupe that was slated to perform at a bar on Ramstein and whose partner is an active-duty service member, told Military.com on Thursday.

"The idea is that we have these public events because for the longest time we weren't able to do that because you'd get arrested and beaten and killed," Fox continued while choking up. "And now I wake up on June 1 and it's all corporate pride, and there's rainbows in every ad and then at the bottom of the rainbow is this big pot of festering lies and hate and fear."

News of the broader on-base drag ban comes as defense officials, including Austin, issue statements in support of Pride Month, the annual observance celebrating the LGBT community.

"As secretary of defense, I remain dedicated to making sure that our LGBTQ+ personnel across the joint force can continue to serve the country that we all love with dignity and pride -- this month and every other one," Austin said in a statement Thursday.

While a Defense Department spokesperson would not directly confirm Austin issued a new order banning on-base drag shows, they suggested such performances violate existing department regulations that govern on-base events hosted by private organizations.

"Per DoD Joint Ethics Regulation (JER), certain criteria must be met for persons or organizations acting in non-federal capacity to use DoD facilities and equipment," Defense Department spokesperson Sabrina Singh said in a statement. "As Secretary Austin has said, the DoD will not host drag events at U.S. military installations or facilities. Hosting these types of events in federally

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funded facilities is inconsistent with regulations regarding the use of DoD resources."

Pressed on exactly what part of the regulations drag shows violate, the department did not have an immediate response.

An [Air Force](#) official told Military.com that base leaders have been told to relocate those shows or cancel them if they're on the installation.

"Consistent with Secretary Austin's congressional testimony, the Air Force will not host drag events at its installations or facilities," the official said.

"Commanders have been directed to either cancel or relocate these events to an off-base location."

During a March hearing before the House Armed Services Committee, Gaetz pressed Austin and Chairman of the Joint Chiefs Gen. Mark Milley about drag shows hosted on military bases. Austin repeatedly told Gaetz that such events, which are typically sponsored by community groups, are "not something that the department supports or funds."

Drag, which dates back to the Elizabethan era and has become a popular form of entertainment among the LGBT community and its allies as a celebration of self-acceptance, has become a fixation of right-wing politics. Several Republican-led states have moved to ban drag shows, including Tennessee and Florida.

In the military, drag dates back decades. The first official drag show after the end of the "Don't Ask, Don't Tell" prohibition on gay people serving openly is [believed to have been held](#) at [Kadena Air Base](#), Japan, in 2014. But [historical records indicate](#) drag performances to entertain the troops happened as least as far back as World War II.

Nellis, where one of this year's canceled shows was slated to happen, has hosted at least two other drag shows in past years, public affairs officials at the base told Military.com.

[According to a copy of the event flyer posted online](#), the drag show scheduled for Thursday was supposed to take place at the Nellis Club Ballroom at 4:30 p.m. local time. It was sponsored by the Nellis LGBTQ+ Pride Council and marketed as a "family-friendly show to celebrate the legacy of Stonewall and contributions of Drag to the LGBT+ community!"

Performers Lawanda Jackson, Coco Montrese and Carne Asada were scheduled to be at the event, according to the poster.

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Jackson told Military.com in a phone interview that a reporter was the one who broke the news about the cancellation on Wednesday. The drag performer is worried what precedent and message the abrupt removal of the on-base show will send to service members.

"It took a second to digest it, but I was saddened by the ripple effect this was going to cause," Jackson said. "It pushes everything back."

The LGBT community at Ramstein weathered similar criticism last year over a planned "Drag Queen Storytime" at a base library. The event was canceled as criticism started pouring in on Facebook and from lawmakers in D.C., particularly a letter Sen. Marco Rubio, R-Fla., sent Air Force Secretary Frank Kendall calling the event "completely insane."

After that incident, Ramstein's LGBT community rallied to form a nonprofit, called KMC Pride, a reference to the Kaiserslautern Military Community, to advocate for themselves and host LGBT-themed events.

The group hosted a drag show at a base bar in March, the first on-base drag event since the story time controversy, with little fanfare, though the founder of the organization told Military.com they had to assure base officials that children would not be present.

"We got a bunch of new members and they were talking about how much fun they had and how much it did mean that we had an event like this on-base and there is a group like this," Natalie Ricketts, KMC Pride's founder, told Military.com in an interview in May. "Being a brand-new, private org and being able to throw an event like that and be successful after everything that had happened, yes, that was a huge deal."

Ricketts said she founded the group after seeing the emotional and mental toll the criticism of the drag storytime took on her wife, a transgender active-duty service member. Officially, base officials maintained at the time that the library event was canceled because it didn't go through the proper approval process.

"She didn't expect to deal with this type of discrimination on a military base overseas," Ricketts said of her wife. "Regardless of what the actual reasoning behind canceling [last year's] events was, it still looks like leadership sided with discrimination."

This year's canceled event was scheduled to take place June 17 at a base pub called the Brit Bar and was restricted to people 18 years and older. With an event again canceled this year, Fox said members of the drag troupe, called the Monarchy of RoyalTEA Drag Family, are fearful for transgender service

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members since drag is often conflated with being transgender.

"How do you keep fighting?" Fox said. "They said that we could do this if we got the right paperwork in order, that because this was a cultural event and celebration for a marginalized group that really all we needed to do was get our paperwork in order and then we'd be able to do it."

"How do you win when the game is rigged? How do you even play?" Fox said.

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