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## OPINION

An unwarranted attack on transgender service

By JOHN D. HUTSON | Special to Stars and Stripes | Published: February 6, 2018

I was extremely moved to see Rep. Joseph Kennedy III, D-Mass., invite Staff Sgt. Patricia King to attend President Donald Trump's first State of the Union address. If the president has his way, King will be thrown out of the military under a transgender exclusion policy announced in July — one which, not too long ago, I might have supported. When first approached about the possibility of transgender individuals serving in the military, I must admit, I was a skeptic. All of the usual concerns about unit cohesion and the lethality of our fighting force gave me pause. But after reviewing the considerable research on the matter and learning about transgender servicemembers like King who are already serving honorably and successfully, I have changed my mind. I now believe that welcoming transgender sailors, Marines, soldiers and air personnel is the right thing to do, both ethically and for the sake of readiness.

Whatever one thinks about transgender service, however, there is no question that careening personnel policy from one pole to the other is bad for the armed forces. The military has now had four transgender policies in less than two years, shifting from a complete ban to permitting existing transgender troops to serve openly in June 2016, to Trump's announced ban in August 2017, to a court-ordered injunction requiring the military to admit transgender individuals. For that reason alone, the administration should recognize it's time to move on and stop trying to defend a ban that the military itself has already reviewed and rejected.

Militaries and other large institutions try to minimize repeated fluctuations in personnel policy for good reasons. Mixed messages from leadership undermine respect for the rules and obedience to the chain of command. Institutions that depend on maintaining good order and discipline must be disciplined themselves, as inconsistency is the enemy of readiness. That's why even political and military leaders who didn't like policy changes such as racial integration and women in combat generally didn't push for those policies to be reversed, even as administrations came and went.

Good order and discipline can't be separated from the promise not to break faith with the troops. For a military to function, trust must run up and down the chain of command. The military is entrusted to care for the people who serve, and that commitment is what allows troops to focus on their mission and not on wondering which rug might be pulled out next by their own leaders. The sentiment is echoed by commanders, who have shown support for their transgender troops. They would be ill-served by having to implement yet another policy reversal, and to endure the loss of some of their best men and women.

Logan Ireland, an Air Force staff sergeant who deployed to Afghanistan, is one of thousands

of transgender servicemembers who are dedicated to selfless service. Since the transgender ban was first lifted, Ireland has been named “NCO of the Quarter.” Nothing is more important to Ireland than serving his country, and it is in the military’s interest to avoid wasting his talent.

The uncertainty created by policy whipsaws is inherently bad for all servicemembers, not just transgender personnel, because it undercuts trust, bonding and planning. Under any version of a transgender ban, one group of troops is singled out and stigmatized as second-class citizens, unfit to serve and subject to unpredictable removal. How can unit mates learn to trust each other and build bonds with peers who are designated as a threat to the very mission? Under inclusive policies, by contrast, transgender personnel have been treated like everyone else, with policy and leadership reinforcing that all team members count equally. Policy flip-flops send confusing signals to all troops about who deserves to wear the uniform, undermining cohesion as a result.

Following years of research and debate, the U.S. military last month began admitting openly transgender individuals for the first time in history. Yet prominent opponents, citing outdated claims about threats to unit cohesion and a trumped up constitutional crisis, have assailed the step, outlining a plan for the Trump administration to reinstate the transgender ban.

Transgender service, which 18 of our allies such as Israel and the U.K. also allow, has been studied comprehensively by scholars, military academics, think tanks and the Defense Department itself. The Pentagon has already implemented inclusive policy, including issuing all necessary training, guidance and implementation documents. And brave transgender Americans like King and Ireland have already donned the uniform and begun to serve openly and effectively — without causing disruptions.

The administration should acknowledge this reality and recognize that it does not make sense to fight it any further. That would be a win for the nation, the military and transgender troops.

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