

Don't Fall In

The danger of trans military inclusion

By Drew Cordes

This is an essay I never felt I had to write. I've said the things I'm about to say so many times to nodding heads in queer and trans community and among friends on social media, in person, in activist circles. These are facts, statistics, and policies I thought we were all at least aware of on some level. I always felt like the vast majority of us were on the same page. But the recent news of the Pentagon deciding to openly welcome transgender people in the U.S. military proved me wrong. Publications, organizations, and people I know and respect trumpeted the announcement as a victory, a step forward for trans rights. Not just mainstream people and sources either. Queer ones. Trans ones.

Many did this with explicit celebration, positing trans people, or just more people and diversity in general in the military as a good thing, a step forward, a mark of justice. Many others did this with a tacit endorsement — neglecting to present any critique from those in the trans and queer justice movements themselves. This is often justified as an attempt at some form of just-the-facts journalistic neutrality, which does not actually exist. It is merely a reflection of the privilege and bias of those with the power to shape the discourse cherry-picking which “facts” they think are relevant. Or more to the point, knowingly or unknowingly choosing which facts will safeguard their continued financial security and power to shape discourse. As such, we only heard one side of this story: Trans people can serve openly now, and the military will treat them with respect and meet their needs!

Since the full, contextual story of what a minority faces in the military, what anyone faces in the military is criminally underrepresented in this discussion, we have to create it ourselves. Many of us already do this. Conversations happen between us in community regularly, but less so in more mainstream, accessible media. The few critiques that do circulate about this issue, fortunately, also call out why this is the case. But those critiques, incisive as they are and as often as we publicize and distribute them, are still an overwhelming minority, easily overshadowed and lost amid the mainstream media machine, with LGBT outlets increasingly part of it. We need more.

This is, apparently, an essay I very much need to write.

How did this happen?

As detailed in a few of the aforementioned critiques (which I urge you to read [here](#) and [here](#)), this cause gained visibility and succeeded because of the efforts of a few conservative wealthy people. One in particular. Trans legal scholar, professor, and founder of Sylvia Rivera Law

Project, Dean Spade explains:

That individual is Col. Jennifer Natalya Pritzker, billionaire heir to the Hyatt Hotel fortune. In August (2013), Col. Pritzker [came out as trans publicly](#). The Pritzker family, which includes Commerce Secretary Penny Pritzker, are true 1-percenters. Colonel Pritzker, along with 10 other members of her family, are listed in the [Forbes list](#) of the “400 Richest Americans.”

The critique in TruthOut expounds:

Over the years, [Pritzker has donated](#) thousands of dollars to Republican political campaigns in her home state of Illinois, but pushing for trans military inclusion is her current pet cause. Funders for LGBTQ Issues, a group that tracks queer-focused charities, called her 2013 donation of [\\$1.35 million to the Palm Center](#) (formerly the Center for the Study of Sexual Minorities in the Military) the “largest transgender-focused grant” ever. ... According to Funders for LGBTQ Issues, in 2012, all trans-related charitable grants equated to just over \$5 million, making Pritzker’s \$1.35 million a relatively large sum with the potential for a substantial ripple effect on the community.

The trans community’s most visible member, ultra-conservative 1 percenter Caitlyn Jenner, also advocated for trans military inclusion as well, calling it “a great idea” in her ESPY acceptance speech. A stance in line with her endorsements of both [Ted Cruz](#) and [Donald Trump](#).

Military inclusion is not a cause that trans communities fought for or care about. Trans communities express desire for competent, affordable, accessible health care; about housing; about job security; about healthy stable income; about the criminalization of black and brown bodies; about rights for sex workers; about better media representation; about standing with intersecting marginalized communities like indigenous and immigrant populations.

Military inclusion is a cause that Pritzker, Jenner, and other LGBT conservatives, Republicans, and 1 percenters advocated and fought for. Any study or news article citing Pritzker, the Tawani Foundation she founded, or the Palm Center, which it generously funded, may reflect this agenda. ([Pritzker also funded the University of Victoria’s transgender studies program](#), the first of its kind. So let’s keep an eye on that as well.)

But even with the funding, why and how could such a bold, progressive swoop of inclusion happen in such a conservative institution as the military? Surely if we’re accepted there, it’s the mark of some greater change and acceptance in the culture, right?

Not really. This is a cause that a conservative institution like the military is willing to allow because it is and always has been willing to use members of marginalized communities as cannon fodder. Regardless of whether you have rights or not, the U.S. will happily throw your body in harm’s way. LGBT folks, immigrants, and people of color have fought in every war the U.S. ever had. If this service was actually a step toward justice, rights, or full citizenship, it would’ve happened for these communities by now. It has literally been hundreds of years. The truth is the military reinforces and relies on a system which marginalizes people, because it

requires a steady supply of people who have few other options but to join. Its numbers would dwindle if we all had comfortable income, good educations, housing, and fulfilling pursuits. It cannot allow that to happen.

Harm reduction

People in tough situations have the right to do what they think is best. Unquestionably. We all recognize that many people who enlist in the military do not do it because they dream of serving, think it will be great, or believe in its mission and purpose. Many do it because they are from these marginalized communities and they are out of life options. Because they are facing poverty, little chance of advancement, a lifetime stuck in a place or situation that is not good for them. This is one of the most basic connections between the military and capitalism that forms what is recognized as the military industrial complex. Wherein both entities are invested in keeping people disadvantaged, so we will be more likely to accept this option of doing its highly dangerous bidding in exchange for promises of life stability, opportunity, advancement, purpose. The military sells itself as a way out. And now it is selling itself as a way out specifically for trans people.

It claims it will no longer discriminate against us like so many other employers do. It will give us housing, when so many landlords, banks, and sellers will not. It will give us a job, and experience that will aid our search for eventual civilian employment. It will give us the health care that we need. It will even give us transition-related care — hormones and surgeries — we have trouble finding, accessing, and affording. All this in exchange for a little bootcamp and some free world travel! Not a bad deal, right?

Whether we're thinking of enlisting ourselves, or whether we're just thinking of these policies as improving welfare of the trans people who want the option or who are already serving, these misleading promises and misrepresentations of what military service entails will likely harm more trans people than they help. For the sake of those trans people or anyone considering joining or advocating for the military, let's examine these claims of respect and advancement, alongside some well known facts and statistics about what military service does to people on both sides of the rifle. Decisions are best made with as much contextual information as possible.

Joining

Before we even get into the new benefits and accommodations the military claims to offer trans people, we first have to clearly establish what a person goes through and gives up when joining.

Recruiters lie. It's a fact. A widely known fact. And it's perfectly legal for them to lie to you, to promise you everything you want to make your time in the military as manageable and smooth as possible, and then pull a bait and switch. Never trust a single promise. The only thing that

matters is your [enlistment contract](#), which many people do not take the time, have the ability, or even have an opportunity to go over in any detail. This contract, in fact, explicitly includes a “My recruiter may have lied to me and I’m OK with it” clause:

I fully understand that only those agreements in Section B and Section C of this document or recorded on the attached annex(es) will be honored. I also understand that any other promises or guarantees made to me by anyone that are not set forth in Section B or the attached annex(es) are not effective and will not be honored.

Once you sign that contract, your body belongs to the military. You do what they say or face severe punishment. Punishment that is entirely legal.

Many still believe they can join the military for certain benefits but object or refuse to participate in activities they find unethical. Or that the worst that can happen for this is getting kicked out and you go on with your life. That’s not how it works.

If you sign that contract, you are subject to laws and punitive measures that civilians are not. As the contract states:

I understand that many laws, regulations, and military customs will govern my conduct and require me to do things under this agreement that a civilian does not have to do. My enlistment/reenlistment agreement is more than an employment agreement. It effects a change in status from civilian to military member of the Armed Forces. As a member of the Armed Forces of the United States, I will be:

(1) Required to obey all lawful orders and perform all assigned duties.

(2) Subject to separation during or at the end of my enlistment. If my behavior fails to meet acceptable military standards, I may be discharged and given a certificate for less than honorable service, which may hurt my future job opportunities and my claim for veteran’s benefits.

(3) Subject to the military justice system, which means, among other things, that I may be tried by military courts-martial. (4) Required upon order to serve in combat or other hazardous situations. ...

b. Laws and regulations that govern military personnel may change without notice to me. Such changes may affect my status, pay, allowances, benefits, and responsibilities as a member of the Armed Forces REGARDLESS of the provisions of this enlistment/reenlistment document.

If you refuse to obey orders or display insubordination you can legally be docked two-thirds of your pay, sentenced to hard labor, or incarcerated for days, weeks, months, or even years. And military laws apply wherever you are, on base or off, on duty or not, on furlough or leave. It doesn’t matter. If you happen to be charged with a civilian crime, such as getting caught with pot on the street in your hometown, while an active member of the military, you can be tried by the

military's system regardless of where you were or whether you were in uniform or on duty.

And since you're in the military, many more things are now illegal for you. Such as [adultery](#), which carries a maximum punishment of dishonorable discharge, forfeiture of all pay and allowances, and confinement for up to 1 year. So if you have an open or polyamorous marriage, the military is legally allowed to garnish your pay and lock you up. Even lesser infractions carry supreme risk. Veteran Travis Haan describes his experience on his blog [The Wise Sloth](#):

You can theoretically go to jail for not doing a jumping jack, not buttoning your shirt, talking back to your boss, quitting your job, not taking your hat off when you go inside, not saluting the flag or walking on the grass. You can even get charged with destruction of government property for getting a sunburn on your day off.

If you do end up getting kicked out via an Other-than-Honorable, Bad Conduct, or Dishonorable Discharge while managing to avoid hard labor or incarceration, as the contract said, you won't receive any benefits and it might negatively affect your chances at gaining civilian employment.

Once you sign that contract, you've legally agreed to all this for eight years. Eight years. Getting out of it early can be extremely difficult and unpleasant. If these are possible punishments for failure to comply (knowingly or not) when your orders are ironing a shirt, what is it like when the orders are to occupy foreign lands and shoot and bomb people?

You may not want to do it, but it's not up to you anymore. You've signed off on this system of coercion. If you disobey, you could be locked up, docked pay, forced to do hard labor, have your future thrown into question. Do you want to go through all that? Or are you forced to just pull the trigger and hope?

There's a lot more to that four-page contract that meets the eye. There's a reason Chelsea Manning got 35 years in solitary confinement just for releasing documents to paint a more transparent picture of U.S. warfare, including video of the U.S. troops killing hundreds of innocent civilians. Because she signed that contract. Law and civil rights in the military are not the same as in the civilian world. Its courts are not the same as in the civilian world. The military polices itself, and has [its own justice system](#). Under one of the charges Manning faced, "aiding the enemy," the military could have legally killed her if it decided she was guilty. She ended up being sentenced to 35 years, and because she's trans, they put her in solitary confinement, a practice the UN classifies as torture. A condition so torturous that she made an attempt on her own life just a few days ago on July 5.

Your rights as you know them change significantly if you join the military. But OK, what about the things the military claims it will do for us trans people if we're willing to sacrifice and play by their rules for a while? Let's look at what we can expect if we agree.

The claims and the cost

Trans gatekeeping

The [military's new policies for trans people](#) come with all sorts of gatekeeping stipulations. The first is that a trans person can only join “provided that they are considered stable in their identified gender for 18 months, as certified by their doctor and verified by a military doctor.” ([Washington Post](#))

So, a year and half in their “identified gender,” and a military doctor needs to sign off on their legitimacy and suitability. And no word on whether nonbinary identities qualify as recognized or stable genders. Will the military be going gender-neutral? I don't think so.

In order to transition while in uniform, the gatekeeping steps up. In addition to needing a military doctor to sign off on transition as medically necessary, a trans person needs the approval of their commanding officer. The [policy language](#) repeatedly gives both the commanding officer and military departments multiple outs to disqualify a person for transition. Usually taking a form along the lines of:

the commander will consider and balance the needs of the individual and the needs of the command ...

Commander's Role.

(1) Review a Service member's request to transition gender. Ensure, as appropriate, a transition process that: ...

(c) Ensures military readiness by minimizing impacts to the mission (including deployment, operational, training, and exercise schedules, and critical skills availability), as well as to the morale and welfare, and good order and discipline of the unit.

3.5. INITIAL ENTRY TRAINING AND CONSIDERATIONS ASSOCIATED WITH THE FIRST TERM OF SERVICE.

a. A blanket prohibition on gender transition during a Service member's first term of service is not permissible. However, the Department recognizes that the All-Volunteer Force readiness model is largely based on those newly accessed into the military being ready and available for multiple training and deployment cycles during their first term of service. This readiness model may be taken into consideration by a commander in evaluating a request for medical care or treatment or an (exception to policy) associated with gender transition during a Service member's first term of service. ...

(4) If a Service member requests non-urgent medical treatment or an (exception to policy) associated with gender transition during the first term of service, including during periods of initial entry training in excess of 180 days, the commander may give the factors set forth in Paragraph 3.5.a significant weight in considering and balancing the individual need associated with the request and the needs of the command ...

So if someone higher up the chain thinks a soldier's gender transition might ruffle some feathers within the unit, make the unit weaker, affect how it operates, make it less ready or available, they're fully within their rights to deny it. How sensitive and forward thinking do we think military leaders are when it comes to this? When someone wants to take estrogen, which can affect muscle mass; when cis members in the unit struggle with pronouns and new names; when feminine dress and a little makeup might make people a little uncomfortable; let alone bathroom and locker room facilities. Do we think a hardened military drill sergeant is going to strongly and sensitively stand up to the entire unit, defend a trans femme's right to her authentic gender identity, and effectively educate the members of the unit about how to fully understand and respect a trans person's gender expression? Or do we think that commanding officer is more likely to tell the single trans person, "Sorry, but I can't let you do that right now. The cohesion of the unit as a whole comes first."

The military also reserves the right to deny and not cover procedures its doctors consider cosmetic and not medically necessary to transition ([Military Times](#)). How understanding do we think the U.S. military will be about which is what?

There is likely to be much more gatekeeping in the military than daily civilian life. There's a good chance a trans person will be denied and not allowed to transition either medically or experientially. But yes, there is a chance they might be allowed. And if they've already transitioned to their authentic gender (again, presuming it's not nonbinary because there's been no mention of that whatsoever in all this), maybe the military will cover their hormones and all the other gender-related medical care they need. Hell, let's assume a trans person gets lucky and every single piece of their trans-related care is taken care of. What else does military service have in store for them?

Sexual harassment and assault

Here are just a few statistics from a [report](#) by independent nonprofit investigators Protect Our Defenders, which I urge you to take a look at yourself.

Harassment

- 160,500 service members (1 in 4 women, 1 in 14 men) faced severe and persistent sexual harassment or gender discrimination in 2014. For most, the harassment persisted for at least several months.
- 60% of victims were harassed by someone in their chain of command.

Assault

- 20,300 members (10,600 men and 9,600 women) were sexually assaulted in 2014. [An average of 55 victims every day]
- 76% of women and 57% of men were assaulted at least twice in 2014, resulting in over

47,000 assaults. [About 130 assaults every day.]

- 62% of women who reported a sexual assault faced retaliation. The majority of these women faced reprisal from superiors and commanders.
- 86% of victims did not report the crime in 2014.
- 1 in 3 victims who did not report believed reporting would hurt their career; that the process would be unfair; or that nothing would be done in their case.
- 1 in 4 feared retaliation from their chain of command or coworkers.
- Nearly half of survivors (45%) were dissatisfied or very dissatisfied with their treatment by their supervisor or chain of command.
- In 2014, of cases where the military could take action, only 19% (588) were prosecuted and just 7% (234) of offenders were convicted of a sex offense.

So, of only the known 180,800 cases of sexual harassment and assault in the military in 2014, only 234 were convicted of a sex offense. That's 0.001 percent. Keep in mind, this is only for the cases we know about.

With such a culture of cover-ups and suppression, it's reasonable to assume actual rates of harassment and assault are much higher. Take a moment to let this sink in.

It's actually much more likely that victims of sexual and harassment and assault face consequences. *Twelve times more likely* in fact, as this [Human Rights Watch report](#) details:

Spat on. Deprived of food. Assailed with obscenities and insults—"whore," "cum dumpster," "slut," "faggot," "wildebeest." Threatened with death by "friendly fire" during deployment. Demeaned. Demoted. Disciplined. Discharged for misconduct.

... the slurs, sanctions, and scorn described above are not the punishments that soldiers and their superiors have meted out to those who have perpetrated sexual assault in the armed forces, but rather what happened to victims who reported their experiences.

Military sexual assault survivors almost never see a remedy for these actions, for which virtually no one is held accountable. Military surveys indicate that most respondents—62 percent—who experienced unwanted sexual contact and reported it to a military authority faced retaliation as a result of reporting. In other words, military service members who reported sexual assault were 12 times more likely to suffer retaliation for doing so than to see their offender, if also a service member, convicted for a sex offense. Just 5 percent (175 out of 3,261) of sexual assault cases in the Defense Department's jurisdiction investigated with a reportable outcome in FY 2014 led to a sex offense conviction.

It is estimated that only one in four victims reports sexual assault to military authorities. In surveys, service members consistently cite fear of retaliation from the perpetrator or the perpetrator's friends, or concern about their careers, as reasons for not reporting.

This is exemplified in the story of Air Force veteran [Ciera Bridges](#) who faced horrific retaliation for reporting sexual harassment from her peers and superiors:

She was not afraid to speak up, really. Having had enough, she reported the various incidents to her supervisor. ... Ciera thought she could rely on her supervisor to handle the situation, or at least guide her in the right direction. That was not the case, and the harassment continued to worsen. In one particularly disturbing incident, Ciera recalls being isolated by one of the Staff Sergeants, held down against her will while the sergeant masturbated and ejaculated on her uniform.

A [New York Times report](#) recounts, in graphic and painstaking detail, the countless barriers and injustices one must overcome for any remote chance of justice in the military court system:

Time after time, [U.S. Air Force chief prosecutor Don Christensen] witnessed commanders demonstrating their support for the accused by sitting behind him in the courtroom; in one case, after a pilot was found not guilty of rape, the commander leapt from his perch and yelled, "Yeah!" Commanders selected the jury, which sometimes issued sentences far lighter than those meted out in civilian courtrooms. He saw one commander withdraw an airtight rape case days before trial, without explanation. He saw another commander testify at sentencing that the noncommissioned officer who had just been convicted of sexually molesting his daughter, a 13-year-old with a developmental disability, was nonetheless of great value to the unit and should therefore be retained. The judge granted his request.

As this report also details, when Christensen successfully brought charges and won a conviction Lt. Col. James Wilkerson of sexually assaulting his civilian house guest in 2012. The rare conviction of high-ranking officer was seen as progress, until his commanding officer Gen. Craig Franklin simply overturned the jury's verdict a few months later. After ensuing outrage, both [Wilkerson](#) and [Franklin](#) were allowed to retire from service with full benefits, facing no charges for their actions, still insisting they did nothing wrong.

The Wilkerson case brought some attempts at reform, but by and large these are crimes and a culture the military has shown little interest in changing. It does, in fact, actively protect this horrific status quo. Recent [news reports](#) detailed how "The Pentagon misled Congress by using inaccurate or vague information about sexual assault cases in an effort to blunt support for a Senate bill that would make a major change in how the military handles allegations of sexual misconduct ..."

But wait, it gets even worse. Because there's an established history of the top military officials in charge of preventing sex crimes engaging in it themselves.

... the Army's top sex-crimes prosecutor, Lt. Col. Jay Morse, received a reprimand after molesting a female officer at a sexual-assault-prevention conference. That same month, the Air Force's sexual-assault-prevention director, Lt. Col. Jeffrey Krusinski, was also reprimanded for drunkenly fondling a woman in a bar against her will. When the civilian authorities did not bring a charge of sexual battery against Krusinski [but rather assault

and battery], Don Christensen strongly recommended to his superiors that he be court-martialed. The convening authority in the matter elected to keep Krusinski in the Air Force. ([New York Times](#))

The corruption goes all the way to the top. The Pentagon's top sexual assault prevention official, the director of the Sexual Assault Prevention and Response Office Maj. Gen. Gary Patton resigned in 2013 after he received criticism from Congress and became the subject of an internal Army review into patient abuse and corruption at a U.S.-funded Afghan hospital and questions over whether he tried to keep staffers from talking with investigators. The same thing happened with Lt. Gen. William Caldwell, who resigned after trying to cover up the exact same incident. ([Politico](#))

Now, trans people already exist with increased likelihood and rates for sexual assault. An [HRC/TPOCC issue brief](#) (page 32) states, "Available research suggests half of all trans people will experience sexual assault." And a [report by FORGE](#), a national transgender anti-violence organization, also states, "Multiple studies indicate that over 50% of transgender people have experienced sexual violence at some point in their lives. This rate is nearly double (1 in 3 girls) or triple (1 in 6 boys) the commonly reported rates of sexual abuse." Again keep in mind, statistics on this are difficult to collect and many cases go unreported.

Does an environment with this pervasive a culture of sex crimes sound like a healthy place for trans people? For anyone? Does this sound like a place that prioritizes the health and safety of one's body?

Mental health and suicide

Let's examine another issue that trans people already face with increased risk — mental health. There isn't great data on many aspects of trans people's lives, which says just about all we need to know about how much society values us. However, the data we do have is alarmingly high, a representation of the daily subjugation and outright terror we are forced to exist within.

The oft-cited statistic from the National Center for Transgender Equality's [2011 study](#) is that 41 percent of trans people have attempted suicide. A [report](#) from the Williams Institute found rates to be slightly higher. Especially frightening is that a statistic like this does not even include someone like me for example — I have battled intense suicidal ideation my entire life, been hospitalized for it five times, done four stints in three different psych hospitals, been on countless drugs, tried multiple therapies, and even had ineffective damaging electro-convulsive treatment, but I've never made an "attempt." So I'm not in that number. Neither are the rest of the trans folks who considered suicide at one time, or are plagued by it daily who haven't made an "attempt."

Depression and anxiety rates are high, too, of course. A [study in the Journal of Gay & Lesbian Mental Health](#) found 52 percent of trans people "showed evidence of psychological distress but

had not received mental health services in the past year.” An [American Public Health Association study](#) found that trans people “had a high prevalence of clinical depression (44.1%), anxiety (33.2%), and somatization (27.5%). [Another found 55 percent](#) of trans people living with social anxiety.

But the most eyebrow raising mental health component of transness I hold onto is more personal and apocryphal. A significant manifestation of post-traumatic stress disorder is hypervigilance. Here are a few of the symptoms of both PTSD and hypervigilance, as per [WebMD](#):

Preoccupation with possible unknown threats, constantly watching and scanning surroundings, startling easily. A persistent sense of insecurity

*Efforts to avoid any people or activities that may arouse recollection of the trauma
Negative or detached emotions Loss of interest Psychological numbing*

Dissociation, whereby someone can experience derealization or depersonalization

I do not know a single trans person who does not actively experience some form of these every single day. If a survey was ever taken to study the prevalence of PTSD and hypervigilance symptoms in trans people, I would expect a result no less than 95 percent.

I’m citing all these reports and statistics, but I don’t really have to. And we don’t need to pathologize these things into illnesses and disorders either. We trans folks know how we have to live. Nonwhite trans people especially. Trans feminine people especially. We feel and see these phenomena every day. In the mirror, walking the streets, in conversations with friends, on our social media feeds. We hear the abuse, we see the suicides, we see the murders, we feel the poverty and unemployment. We know it all too well. We know these things are the result of living in a society that steamrolls lives it does not recognize as valuable. We don’t need trumped up studies, statistics, or authoritative medical labels to tell us that.

How we have forgotten that steamrolling lives occurs more efficiently in the military than perhaps anywhere else, for both its members and opposition, I’m not sure. So here are some more apparently much-needed facts about that.

A [CNN report](#) on the JAMA Psychiatry’s largest ever study of military mental health found,

Almost 25% of nearly 5,500 active-duty, non-deployed Army soldiers surveyed tested positive for a mental disorder of some kind, and 11% within that subgroup also tested positive for more than one illness. ... The rate of major depression is five times as high among soldiers as civilians; intermittent explosive disorder, which results in episodes of extreme anger, is six times as high; and post-traumatic stress disorder was nearly 15 times higher than among civilians, the study found.

Information gathered from the numerous statistics and studies cited on the website [Veterans and PTSD](#) paints a perhaps fuller, even more serious picture, estimating closer to 80 percent for

certain veteran populations.

PTSD statistics are a moving target that is fuzzy. ... And veterans PTSD statistics get revised over time. The findings from the [NVVR Study](#) ... commissioned by the government in the 1980s initially found that for “Vietnam theater veterans” 15% of men had PTSD at the time of the study and 30% of men had PTSD at some point in their life. But a 2003 re-analysis found ... four out of five reporting recent symptoms when interviewed 20-25 years after Vietnam.”

As for suicide, its epidemic rates across the military are well known. A [report](#) from the Department of Veterans Affairs detailing its horrors became widespread news. A [report](#) from Reuters concisely summed it up:

The most extensive study yet by the U.S. government on suicide among military veterans shows more veterans are killing themselves than previously thought, with 22 deaths a day – or one every 65 minutes, on average. ... The news came two weeks after the U.S. military acknowledged that suicides hit a record in 2012, outpacing combat deaths, with 349 active-duty suicides – almost one a day.

That’s right. A staggering 22 veterans a day. And among solely active duty troops, more killed themselves each day than were killed in combat. And these numbers might even be higher. Multiple sources, such as this [CNN report](#), detail how certain veterans didn’t register:

People like Levi Derby, who hanged himself in his grandfather’s garage in Illinois on April 5, 2007. He was haunted, says his mother, Judy Casper, by an Afghan child’s death. He had handed the girl a bottle of water, and when she came forward to take it, she stepped on a land mine. When Derby returned home, he locked himself in a motel room for days. Casper saw a vacant stare in her son’s eyes. A while later, Derby was called up for a tour of Iraq. He didn’t want to kill again. He went AWOL and finally agreed to an “other than honorable” discharge. Derby was not in the VA system, and Illinois did not send in data on veteran suicides to the VA.

This [New York Times article](#) also points out, “suicide experts at the Department of Veterans Affairs said they did not track suicide trends among veterans of specific military units. And the Marine Corps does not track suicides of former service members.” And as the Veterans and PTSD website points out, “not all suicides will be counted as a military suicide (plus, is a person who drinks themselves to death committing suicide?)”

As the trans population’s experiences already lead to astronomically increased suicide and mental health risk, is this an environment that will aid those issues? Or compound them?

Make them worse? If this is what the military does to everyone who enlists, what will it do to us who are already struggling to exist in the margins?

Racism

And just as transphobia and misogyny run rampant in military society, unsurprisingly, so does racism. [Atlanta Blackstar](#) provides a concise overview of many of the problems. A [report](#) from the Military Diversity Leadership Commission ([summarized here by PBS](#)) details how “the demographic composition of the officer corps is far from representative of the American population and ... officers are much less demographically diverse than the enlisted troops they lead.” So minorities do not advance their careers in the military the way cishet white males do.

This may explain why “Among officers, just 3 percent of whites report experiencing discrimination within their current unit, compared with 27 percent of black and Hispanic officers alike.” ([ABC News](#)) And those are just the reports. Black folks continue to fight racist standards of presentation when it comes to things as innocuous as [hairstyles](#), do we think the military will be better when it comes to gender presentation? With trans people being routinely denied employment and advancement opportunities in the civilian world, do we expect the military to be better? Do we think many trans people, white or nonwhite, will be awarded an officer rank?

More blatantly disturbing are the numerous news reports, such as [this one in Reuters](#), detailing the military’s ongoing problem of white supremacist groups sending its members to receive training: “A 2008 report commissioned by the Justice Department found half of all right-wing extremists in the United States had military experience.” But of course, military officials don’t see a problem. “‘We don’t really think this is a huge problem, at Bragg, and across the Army,’ said Colonel Kevin Arata, a spokesman for Fort Bragg. ‘In my 26 years in the Army, I’ve never seen it,’ the former company commander said.”

A report in [Army Times](#) details a particularly disturbing practice.

“When I first got to my unit, someone said we should do ‘Racial Thursdays’ because it’s been a tradition,” said the soldier, who asked to remain anonymous. “It’s something they made up where you can say any racist remark you want without any consequences.” ... The unit where “Racial Thursdays” allegedly took place is the same unit that Pvt. Danny Chen belonged to. Chen, who belonged to C Company, committed suicide Oct. 3, 2011, while deployed to Afghanistan. Authorities said Chen killed himself because he was hazed over his Chinese ancestry. Chen was called names while in training, then was subjected to hazing after he was deployed to Afghanistan, according to his family. On the day of his death, Chen was forced to crawl about 100 yards across gravel carrying his equipment while his fellow soldiers threw rocks at him, the family said.

Just as is the case with sexual assault, cases of racial abuse largely go unreported for fear of retaliation and an adverse effect on one’s life and career in the military and once in the civilian world. We’re all aware of the incredibly heightened risks trans folks of color already face existing in the civilian world. One shudders to think of what life in the military would hold.

Injuries, casualties, death

When most of us think of the dangers of joining the military, the first things that come to mind are death and injury in combat or some type of physical engagement. Since October 2001, nearly 7,000 member of various military branches have died in active missions in Iraq and Afghanistan, with nearly 52,000 wounded, 1,645 of which requiring limb amputations. ([Congressional Research Service](#)). For a more comprehensive report on military casualties and deaths in all U.S. wars, [this CRS report](#) lays it all out.

For some reason, these numbers on casualties of war do not include mental health damage such as PTSD, depression, or anxiety. Nor do they include traumatic brain injuries. As the former CRS report details, from 2000 to the beginning of 2015 alone, 327,299 people suffered varying degrees of traumatic brain injuries while serving. Research over the past 10 years is showing more and more just how serious concussions and TBIs are, and having a TBI myself, I join their chorus in urging you to minimize potential exposures, such as military service.

As much justified mourning happens in the U.S. for these painful numbers of affected U.S. troops, they are a drop in the bucket compared to the numbers of casualties and deaths of innocent civilians caused by the U.S. abroad. Estimates vary broadly, but even the conservative numbers are staggering. In an [article for the Washington Post](#), John Tirman, executive director and principal research scientist at the MIT Center for International Studies, says that since the end of World War II, a conservative estimate is that the U.S. has killed 6 million civilians and soldiers. Another independent and thorough [estimate](#) of U.S. military activities across 37 countries since World War II puts the toll between 20 and 30 million.

For the conservative 6 million estimate, this comes to an average of about 235 people killed every day since 1945. For the 30 million estimate, this comes to an average of about 1,170 people killed every day.

For context, about 2,400 people died in Pearl Harbor and about 3,000 died in 9/11.

And these are estimates of violent deaths as a result of direct action. As many have noted, the tallies would be even higher if they attempted to include collateral fallout — deaths from malnutrition, damaged health services, destroyed housing, environmental instability and exposure that are also caused by U.S. military action.

It is also of note that these studies take the surrender of Japan as their starting point, beginning collection of data immediately after one of the most egregious acts against civilian populations in the history of warfare, as well as the world's only use of nuclear weapons in combat — the U.S. killing a conservative estimate of at least 200,000 civilians in Hiroshima and Nagasaki. The Japanese government, however, classified around 466,000 deaths and casualties from the blasts ([NBC](#) and [Japan Times](#)).

Is this what we're willing to become a part of for the empty promise that the military will take

care of us and honor our requests? Promises they openly acknowledge they are allowed to withdraw? Requests they reserve the right to deny?

Despite knowing all this information, some trans people may decide it's worth the risk. Even though I personally think there are always other options — shelters, nonprofits, friends, food stamps, underground economies, etc. — these are not ideal options of course, but they can be a much more viable harm reduction strategy. And unlike the military they won't harm other people. Some may feel there is no other option. You may think you'll be able to protect yourself and carry out harm reduction strategies in the military for eight years or until you can finagle a discharge that won't negatively affect your life. You may get lucky and succeed. Many do not. Maybe you'll only have to participate indirectly in its violent campaigns and you won't have to risk harsh punishment or incarceration for refusing to directly carry out violence yourself. Maybe you will. But even if one is able to avoid all these risks and horrific experiences themselves, do we want the price of hormones and surgery to be complicity or active participation in this? One of the most physically and economically destructive imperial forces the world has ever known? As [Mattilda Bernstein Sycamore says](#), "You put a rainbow on a bomb, it's still a bomb."

At the very least, if I can't dissuade someone completely from joining such a harmful, destructive force as the U.S. military, they at least need to be prepared for what they're getting into, for what it does to people like us who enlist, to any people who enlist, and what it does to those it targets. Even if a harm reduction strategy does work, there is still the matter of the people targeted by the U.S. forces one is now a part of.

That the cost of one's debatably relative life security is life insecurity, subjugation, disfigurement, suffering, violent attacks, and often death for the people and places in our government's crosshairs. And let us never forget, that many of them are trans and queer, as well.

After service

Another reason many people choose to endure military service is the promise of getting ahead — furthering education, getting work experience, and increasing one's chance of employment in a steady, well-paying job after one's service is over. Unfortunately, this is another myth the military plays up in its promises solely to entice you into signing the contract.

Unemployment rates for all veterans [do not differ much in number or stability](#) than the national averages. For those serving post-9/11, for Black and Latinx people, for younger people, for women, they are often if not consistently higher. ([Bureau of Labor Statistics report](#)).

These numbers also only reflect those who are classified as employed or unemployed. Like all unemployment statistics, they [do not necessarily reflect those who have given up looking for work](#) or those who are disabled, which are both significant figures. Having a disability does not necessarily preclude one from working, but it [certainly doesn't help](#) one's ability to conform to

ableist capitalist notions of how one must work, not to mention employers' tendencies to discriminate. According to the Census [American Community Survey](#) in 2014, an estimated 2,198,300 out of 9,750,600 of non-institutionalized civilian veterans between 21 to 64 years old had a VA service-connected disability. That's 22.5 percent. For [all ages of veterans](#), it's 3,756,100 out of 19,259,700, about 20 percent. And these are "service-connected" disabilities — i.e. sustained in service — not before or after the fact. So one has a greater than 1 in 5 chance of sustaining a disability.

And these numbers only represent those recognized by the VA. Many applications for a disability rating are denied. [Recent news reports](#) suggest these all-encompassing historical figures might be low in comparison to recent trends:

A staggering 45% of the 1.6 million veterans from the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan are now seeking compensation for injuries they say are service-related. That is more than double the estimate of 21% who filed such claims after the [Gulf War](#) in the early 1990s, top government officials told the Associated Press.

And if you think that the VA will provide attentive compassionate care for you should you sustain physical or mental injury or disability no questions asked because the U.S. takes care of its veterans, I urge you to peruse the news and reports compiled at [VAwatchdog.org](#).

Another serious issue that already disproportionately affects both trans people and veterans is homelessness. Joining the military might seem like a welcome alternative to homelessness, a way out and a way to escape it in the future as well. Again, people in tough situations have the right to do what they think is best. It is certainly possible it might help, but the numbers do not inspire much confidence. An estimated 49,933 veterans were homeless as of January 2014, according to a [report on homelessness](#) by the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (which mentions the terms LGBT and transgender exactly zero times). That number is [down significantly](#) from 74,770 in 2010. Furthermore, the [National Coalition for Homeless Veterans states](#) 1.4 million more veterans "are considered at risk of homelessness due to poverty, lack of support networks, and dismal living conditions in overcrowded or substandard housing."

This risk is elevated among minority veterans. The NCHV again states: "Roughly 45% of all homeless veterans are African American or Hispanic, despite only accounting for 10.4% and 3.4% of the U.S. veteran population, respectively." A [report from Newsmax](#) (a conservative website) states: "Returning veterans are twice as likely to become chronically homeless as other Americans, according to Veterans Inc. Women veterans are four times as likely to become homeless as male veterans."

Are the elevated risks of being homeless as a result of bigotry against transness and being homeless as a result of traumatic military service really something we should risk combining?

Conclusion

I oppose the military with these facts, statistics, opinions, this writing, this passion, this contempt because I care about people. Because I don't want any more lives ruined within its ranks or within its sights. Because it has specifically reached out to my trans community, my trans friends, family, partners, and lovers with its deadly empty promises. Promises I'm deeply disturbed to see more people believing than I expected. That is unacceptable. I cannot summon the energy to beseech and convince everyone I know, everyone I could possibly reach to reconsider what they think they know about the military, but when I see a poisoned apple extended to my community and my kin, I will do what I can to defend my loved ones every time.

I don't want them to struggle with PTSD for the rest of their lives the way a trans woman Vietnam vet whom I did activist work alongside of does. The way so many enlisted soldiers and veterans do.

I don't want them risking their bodies in combat or foreign soil, or in their own bunks at home amid its staggering internal harassment and sexual assault rates. I don't want their efforts for justice in response to an assault to be suppressed or used against them.

I don't want my community, whose suicide, suicide attempt, and suicide contemplation rates are already sky high, falling prey to another area of life that openly acknowledges its own frightening high suicide epidemic.

I don't want anyone else to feel what my grandfather felt in the South Pacific when he watched his commanding officer order his friends to advance into an area, then call in an airstrike on that same area moments later.

I don't want anyone else to feel what my former partner and still-family-member felt after they enlisted in October 2001. Not for revenge or some sense of duty or patriotism, but just to see the world and do something with their life. Living in an aircraft carrier off the coast of Pakistan, they and the crew would routinely gather for higher-ups to screen video footage of the latest campaigns. The room would erupt in cheers and laughter as the tapes showed people running for their lives, literally being hunted down, collapsing in a hail of bullets or disappearing in the smoke and rubble of a bomb blast. They told me about how it felt sitting there, realizing, "We don't even know who these people are. And everyone's cheering and laughing as we watch them die. As we are killing them. How do we know these people are our enemies and not civilians? How do we know what they're thinking? If they are enemies, why are they our enemies? Who decided that? How could we even tell who's who? Do these people we're killing have families? Are families getting caught up in all this death and destruction?"

This experience being eerily similar to one described by another trans person who served in the military, Chelsea Manning. One that directly contributed to her decision to speak out about rampant military corruption, cover-ups, and murder.

... [she] listened to a debate within [her] intelligence shop over a 12 July 2007 video of a U.S. aerial weapons team gunning down civilians, including two Reuters journalists, in Iraq. At first, [she] said, the video seemed like any other “war porn” incident [she] saw routinely. But when [Chelsea] further investigated the video, now known around the world as ‘Collateral Murder,’ [she] was appalled.

‘The most alarming aspect of the video to me...was the seemly delightful bloodlust the Aerial Weapons Team seemed to have. They dehumanized the individuals they were engaging and seemed to not value human life, and referred to them as quote-unquote “dead bastards,” and congratulated each other on their ability to kill in large numbers. At one point in the video there is an individual on the ground attempting to crawl to safety. The individual is seriously wounded. Instead of calling for medical attention to the location, one of the aerial weapons team crew members verbally asks for the wounded person to pick up a weapon so that he can have a reason to engage. For me, this seemed similar to a child torturing ants with a magnifying glass.’ ([In Her Own Words](#))

I offer this critique and my passion for it because this violence is done in the name of a country I live in and can presumably offer some effort to change. Because family members and loved ones of mine served and saw the carnage themselves. And because my community and loved ones are now being lured into its horrible maw.

If someone wants to dismiss my opinion because I haven’t served myself, I will disagree with the specious standard that only people who have been complicit or an active part of unethical conduct can legitimately comment or pass judgment on whether or not it is unethical. The myriad facts and sources above speak for themselves. But in the interest of representing more veterans’ voices for those who are interested in their firsthand perspectives, here are some additional warnings.

Here’s [Benjamin Sledge](#):

“You can shoot her...” the First Sergeant tells me. “Technically.” ... It’s the 6-year-old girl who gives me flowers.

Here’s the [suicide note](#) of Daniel Somers, published by Gawker:

The simple truth is this: During my first deployment, I was made to participate in things, the enormity of which is hard to describe. War crimes, crimes against humanity. Though I did not participate willingly, and made what I thought was my best effort to stop these events, there are some things that a person simply can not come back from. ... These things go far beyond what most are even aware of. ... not only am I better off dead, but the world is better without me in it. ... Not suicide, but a mercy killing. I know how to kill, and I know how to do it so that there is no pain whatsoever. It was quick, and I did not suffer. And above all, now I am free. I feel no more pain. I have no more nightmares or flashbacks or hallucinations. I am no longer constantly depressed or afraid or worried. I am free. I ask that you be happy for me for that.

Coast Guard veteran [Panayiota Bertzikis](#), founder of the Military Rape Crisis Center and a rape survivor on recourse for survivors within the military:

The only options out are going AWOL or suicide.

Veteran [Daniel Crimmins](#):

You grew up wanting so bad to be Luke Skywalker, but you realize that you were basically a Stormtrooper, a faceless, nameless rifleman, carrying a spear for empire, and you start to accept the startlingly obvious truth that these are people like you.

[Veteran Travis Haan](#):

If you join the United States military you won't fight for truth, justice or freedom. You'll fight for a government that [crushes public dissent](#) and [locks up more people than any other country in the world](#) in a for-profit prison system that uses inmates as slave labor. You won't fight for peace. You'll fight for a country that commits human rights violations, spies on its own citizens and locks up whistle blowers while protecting war criminals. You'll fight for a country that [destabilizes weaker countries](#) to allow multinational businesses to fleece them out of their natural resources and outsource jobs to their sweatshops. The American military might fight against terrorism, but it also [engages in terrorism](#) and [creates more terrorists](#) every time it kills innocent civilians, which is almost every month.

President of Protect Our Defenders, and former Air Force chief prosecutor, [Col. Don Christensen](#):

Commanders were stopping justice from happening. I knew it had to be changed and I knew it couldn't be changed within the military. The Defense Department will absolutely destroy anyone on active duty who speaks out in favor of justice reform publicly. It is 100 percent a career-ender. ... As the military's inability to have a fair and impartial justice system becomes more known with the American public, there will be fewer moms and dads willing to let their children go into the military.

[Former Army Ranger Rory Fanning](#):

... I just want you to know that it's not too late to change your mind. I did. I became a war resister after my second deployment in Afghanistan ... My own goal is to take what I learned in the military and bring it to high school and college students as a kind of counter-recruiter. There's so much work to be done, given the [10,000 military recruiters](#) in the U.S. working with an almost [\\$700 million](#) advertising budget. After all, kids do need to hear both sides. You can be an effective counter-recruiter without being an ex-military guy. Young people across this country desperately need your energy, your desire to be the best, your pursuit of meaning. Don't waste it in Iraq or Afghanistan or Yemen or Somalia or anywhere else the Global War on Terror is likely to send you.

And here's some well-known words to end on from [U.S. Marine Corps Maj. Gen. Smedley Butler](#), the highest rank authorized at the time, and upon his death (1940) the most decorated Marine in U.S. history. He is the author of [War is a Racket](#).

I served in all commissioned ranks from second lieutenant to major general. And during that period, I spent most of my time being a high-class muscle man for big business, for Wall Street and for the bankers. In short, I was a racketeer, a gangster for capitalism.

I helped in the raping of half a dozen Central American republics for the benefit of Wall Street. The record of racketeering is long. ... Looking back on it, I feel I might have given Al Capone a few hints. The best he could do was to operate his racket in three city districts. We Marines operated on three continents.

Epilogue

To my fellow trans and queer folks:

Please be fully aware of what the military and trans inclusion in the military entails. Harbor no illusions about what the military inflicts upon its own members and upon others. Harbor no illusions about how it will use its legal sovereignty over your body, your mind, and your life for its own purposes with little regard for your well-being.

We cannot fall prey to the pinkwashing propaganda that paints trans military inclusion as justice, as a liberatory force for freedom and democracy, as a life opportunity. That is not and has never been what the military is about.

Like all other capitalist enterprises, the military is about the consolidation of wealth and power for a privileged few at the cost of the expendable lives of everyday people who are forced or convinced to carry out the goals of the powerful as their own.

Do not be fooled. The military does not give a fuck about our lives. It does not give a fuck about anyone's lives except the extremely wealthy and powerful who control it, and whose interests it is designed to protect.

To trans and queer outlets, organizations, and publications:

I'accuse.

Those that outright endorse, hold damaging "neutrality," and stay silent on the military's harmful propaganda of "inclusion" for queer and trans people, for any people, speak volumes about your politics, your failures at holistic ethical journalism, and who the masters of your operations actually are.

This is not consistent with what queerness and transness stand for. The gift of our lives as queer

and trans people is that we are an embodiment of resistance to and liberation from hegemonic systems of exploitative power. That is a duty greater than any amount of perceived or promised job security, personal power, financial stability, or ignorant jingoistic nationalism. As those who experience injustice, we are gifted with the ability to detect it elsewhere, root it out, recognize it, expose it, and stand up against it ourselves and alongside others in its path wherever we find it. This is a duty greater than all others. And if you don't see it but others do, particularly those who experience greater injustice than you do — trans people, nonwhites, women, natives, immigrants, disabled, etc. — then you get behind those people, you protect them, and you shout what they shout.

I ask you all to closely examine which side you're actually on when you neglect to speak and write the full picture of U.S. policy and culture. And I warmly invite you to join the side seeking justice and healing for our people, and for all people.