



## *League of United Latin American Citizens*

March 18, 2025

Honorable Donald J. Trump  
President of the United States  
1600 Pennsylvania Avenue  
Washington, DC 20500

Honorable Peter B. Hegseth  
Secretary of Defense  
1000 Defense Pentagon  
Washington, DC 20301

RE: Honoring Our Nation's Diverse Heroes – Restoring Arlington National Cemetery's History and Protecting Military and Veteran Services

President Trump and Secretary of Defense Hegseth,

We write on behalf of America's civil rights and veterans' communities to strongly object to the removal of historical content highlighting Black, Latino, Asian American and Pacific Islander (AAPI), LGBTQ+, women, Indigenous, and disabled veterans from the Arlington National Cemetery website. Current actions, reportedly part of a broader purge of "Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion" (DEI) materials, are a direct affront to the proud legacy of service that Americans of all backgrounds have given to this nation<sup>1</sup>.

These actions send a dangerous and false message that the sacrifices of Black, Latino, AAPI, LGBTQ+, women, Indigenous, and disabled service members are less significant, undermining the very foundation of our military's strength. This erasure comes amid other alarming developments, including the dismissal of highly qualified leaders like General James Q. Brown Jr. and Admiral Lisa Franchetti, renewed restrictions on transgender service members, the closure of the Veterans Benefits Administration's Office of Equity Assurance, and staffing reductions at the VA.

Stripping away these stories dishonors those who have served, weakens the unity of our armed forces, and diminishes the inspiration that drives future generations to serve. The greatness of the United States lies in its ability to recognize and honor the contributions of all who help build and defend this nation. We strongly urge the immediate restoration of these educational resources to reaffirm that every service member is valued for their dedication and sacrifice—not disregarded because of their identity.

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<sup>1</sup> Washington Post, [Arlington Cemetery website scrubs links about Black and female veterans](#), March 14, 2024.



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### **Historical Contributions of Black, Latino, AAPI, and Women Service Members**

From the Revolutionary War to today, service members of color and women have played indispensable roles in defending the United States. Recognizing their achievements through the lens of race, ethnicity, and gender is not divisive—it is necessary to understanding the full scope of our nation's military history. Black American heroes like the Tuskegee Airmen, the first Black military pilots, flew over 1,800 missions in World War II despite facing discrimination at home, while the 6888th Central Postal Directory Battalion, the only all-Black, all-female Army unit deployed overseas during the war, ensured vital communications reached troops.

Latino service members have fought in every U.S. conflict, with the Borinqueneers—the 65th Infantry Regiment from Puerto Rico—displaying extraordinary bravery in the Korean War. Sixty-one Latino service members have received the Medal of Honor, our nation's highest military distinction, recognizing their sacrifices from the Civil War to today. Women have been integral to the military's success, from World War II codebreakers and pilots to trailblazers like Captain Joy Bright Hancock, who expanded opportunities for women in the Navy, and Major General Marcelite Harris, the first Black woman to achieve two-star general rank in the Air Force.

The now-removed pages on Arlington National Cemetery's website once preserved this vital history—one of perseverance, sacrifice, and patriotism. Historian Kevin Levin underscores its importance: *"This is just the kind of history that we want students to be learning... a history that allows students from different backgrounds to make a meaningful connection with one of our sacred sites."* Erasing these records diminishes public understanding of the diversity that has strengthened our military and denies future generations the opportunity to see themselves reflected in its legacy. Removing this content is not just an oversight but an injustice to those who have served and a disservice to those who seek to honor and learn from their contributions.

### **Notable War Heroes Erased from Arlington National Cemetery's Website**

It is unconscionable that Arlington National Cemetery's website would hide the stories of some of our most distinguished war heroes. Among the content taken down were profiles of figures like General Colin L. Powell and Air Force Lt. Col. Hector Santa Anna – leaders whose lives epitomize service to country.

- **Gen. Colin Powell (1937–2021):** A child of Jamaican immigrants who grew up in the Bronx, General Powell rose through the Army's ranks to become the youngest and first Black Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff. A Vietnam veteran and four-star general, he later



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served as Secretary of State, always emphasizing duty, integrity, and public service. Powell's leadership during the Gulf War and beyond blazed a trail for countless minority officers. His story, once featured at Arlington National Cemetery, underscores that African Americans have long been integral to the highest levels of our national defense.

- **Lt. Col. Hector Santa Anna (1923–2006):** A Mexican American airman and proud member of the League of United Latin American Citizens (LULAC), Lt. Col. Santa Anna was a decorated World War II B-17 bomber pilot and later a pilot in the Berlin Airlift. Over a 30-year Air Force career, Santa Anna also mentored younger pilots and remained active in veteran and Latino community organizations after retirement. He is buried at Arlington, a testament to his service. His removal from the Arlington National Cemetery narrative is deeply painful to his family and community. As his daughter, Sylvia Willoughby, has said: "It is shameful that the United States is going to decide who our heroes are based on the color of their skin or their sex." This sentiment resonates deeply among many families of minority and women veterans today.
- **Col. Ruby Bradley (1907-2002):** Col. Ruby Bradley was a U.S. Army nurse who served with incredible bravery during World War II and the Korean War. During WWII, she was captured by the Japanese in the Philippines and held as a prisoner of war (POW) for nearly three years. Despite facing extreme hardship, she secretly provided medical care to fellow prisoners, saving countless lives under horrific conditions. When she was finally liberated in 1945, she weighed just 84 pounds but had never stopped tending to wounded soldiers and civilians. She personally assisted in over 1,100 surgeries and evacuated more than 4,000 wounded soldiers. By the time she retired in 1963, Col. Ruby Bradley had earned 34 medals and citations, making her one of the most decorated women in U.S. military history. She was laid to rest at Arlington National Cemetery, a fitting final tribute to her lifelong service.

By sidelining the legacies of men like Powell and Santa Anna and women like Bradley, the Pentagon sends a dangerous message: that the sacrifices of women and service members of color somehow matter less. We know that nothing could be further from the truth. These heroes fought under the same flag and bled the same red blood as their white male counterparts. Their stories belong at the forefront of our national memory, not pushed into the shadows.



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### **Broader Concerns Affecting Veterans and Military Service**

The erasure of these historical materials is troublingly accompanied by other actions affecting the military veterans:

- The Veterans Benefits Administration's Office of Equity Assurance has been eliminated—an office created to address documented disparities in how benefits are distributed. A 2023 Government Accountability Office report found approval rates for disability claims by White male veterans were 3% to 22% higher than for Black male veterans for the same medical conditions between 2010 and 2020.<sup>2</sup>
- Plans to reduce Veterans Affairs staffing by 80,000 positions raise significant concerns about the impact on healthcare delivery and benefits processing. These cuts threaten ongoing clinical trials focused on suicide prevention and substance abuse treatment, with researchers warning that \$35 million in critical studies could be lost.<sup>3</sup>
- Military healthcare providers report growing challenges in mental health service delivery, with some veterans from marginalized communities expressing fear of discrimination.

These actions collectively undermine services for veterans of all backgrounds while having particularly severe impacts on those who already face barriers to care.

### **National Security Implications**

These attacks on diversity within our military have real consequences for national security. Military leaders, including those who served under Republican administrations, have long recognized in amicus briefs to the Supreme Court that diversity in military leadership is essential for combat readiness and unit cohesion. During the Vietnam War, for example, the gap between a diverse enlisted corps and a homogeneous officer corps led to "increased racial polarization, pervasive disciplinary problems" and an "inability to fight" in some units. By erasing the contributions of diverse military heroes while simultaneously undermining diversity initiatives,

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<sup>2</sup> Coleman, Vernal. "Trump Axes VA Office Created to Fix Disparities in Veterans' Benefits." *ProPublica*, 11 Mar. 2025, <https://www.propublica.org/article/veterans-affairs-trump-disparities-benefits-office-equity-assurance>.

<sup>3</sup> Stone, Mike, et al. "US Plans to Fire 80,000 Veterans Affairs Workers as Part of Trump Cuts, Sparking Backlash." *Reuters*, 5 Mar. 2025, <https://www.reuters.com/world/us/departments-veterans-affairs-cut-80000-jobs-part-trump-cuts-2025-03-05/>.



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we risk creating environments where service members question the legitimacy of their commanders based on background rather than qualification.

### **Current Diversity in the U.S. Military**

Beyond honoring the past, preserving these histories is vital because they speak to who is defending our nation today. The U.S. armed forces have grown ever more diverse, and service members from minority communities and women are indispensable to our military readiness:

- **Racial and Ethnic Minorities:** As of the most recent Department of Defense data, approximately one-third of active-duty personnel – about 407,000 service members – identify as members of a racial minority group<sup>4</sup>. This includes Black Americans, Hispanic/Latino Americans, Asian Americans, Native Americans, Pacific Islanders, and more. In fact, 18.4% of active-duty troops are of Hispanic or Latino heritage a figure that has steadily risen over the past decades. Our fighting forces draw strength from this diversity, which reflects the American people and brings critical skills, perspectives, and language abilities to the field.
- **Women in Uniform:** Women today make up 17.5% of active-duty military personnel – nearly one in every five service members – and serve in every role from pilots to battlefield commanders. Their representation has grown significantly since even a generation ago, thanks to the trailblazers of the past. Efforts to erase women's stories from official narratives are not only an insult to those who served, but also to the more than 228,000 women in uniform right now who deserve to see their contributions respected and remembered.
- **Transgender Service Members:** Despite proven records of dedication and excellence, transgender troops have faced renewed attacks on their right to serve openly. Recent policies not only threaten their healthcare but undermine unit cohesion and military readiness.

In an era when our military relies on an all-volunteer force, maintaining pride in service among all communities is strategic to our national security. The diversity of our troops is a force multiplier, and recognizing that in our history is part of respecting those who serve.

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<sup>4</sup> USNI News. *Department of Defense 2022 Demographic Profile*. 29 Nov. 2023, <https://news.usni.org/2023/11/29/departments-of-defense-2022-demographic-profile>.



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### **Restore Arlington's Educational Content and Support All Military Members and Veterans**

President Trump and Secretary Hegseth, we strongly urge you to:

1. Immediately restore the removed Arlington Cemetery website content and any similar educational materials across the Department of Defense
2. Reconsider policies that eliminate programs addressing documented disparities in veterans' benefits, including the Office of Equity Assurance
3. Ensure that staffing decisions at the Department of Veterans Affairs prioritize healthcare delivery, benefits processing, and research that benefit all veterans
4. Maintain support for specialized care programs that serve the unique needs of women veterans, LGBTQ+ veterans, and other groups with specific healthcare requirements
5. Reverse restrictions on transgender service members' ability to serve openly and access necessary healthcare, recognizing their valuable contributions to military readiness and effectiveness

In the words of Sylvia Willoughby and so many outraged Gold Star families, *“you can’t pick and choose the history that you want to teach. Every group has a history to be proud of.”* We call on you to correct this shameful error at once. America’s strength lies in **E pluribus unum** – out of many, one. The story of Arlington National Cemetery must remain the story of *all* who served. Anything less is a disservice to their memory and to the principles of equality and unity that they sacrificed to uphold.

Sincerely,

League of United Latin American Citizens (LULAC)

Legal Defense Fund

Common Cause

Lawyers' Committee for Civil Rights Under Law

NAACP

End Citizens United

Southern Poverty Law Center

National Partnership for Women and Families



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UnidosUS

National Women's Law Center

American GI Forum

National Association for Black Veterans (NABVETS)

Global Black Economic Forum

CC:

Honorable Roger Frederick Wicker, U.S. Senator, Chairman, Senate Committee on Armed Services

Honorable John “Jack” Reed, U.S. Senator, Ranking Member, Senate Committee on Armed Services

Honorable Michael “Mike” Dennis Rogers, U.S. Representative, Chairman, House Armed Services Committee

Honorable David Adam Smith, U.S. Representative, Chairman, House Armed Services Committee

Honorable Yvette Diane Clarke, U.S. Representative, Chairwoman, Congressional Black Caucus

Honorable Adriano Espaillat, U.S. Representative, Chairman, Congressional Hispanic Caucus

Honorable Grace Meng, U.S. Representative, Chairwoman, Congressional Asian Pacific American Caucus