

United States: Donald Trump's Ban on Transgender Troops Is Not a Distraction - It's the point

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Every evening I go to bed wondering the same thing: Whom will Donald Trump abuse on his Twitter feed next? On many a morning, I wake to find a fresh and heretofore unimagined hell. He's like the C train, only more reliable. Today, it was news that Trump had appeared to ban transgender people from serving "in any capacity in the U.S. Military," reversing an Obama-era policy that allowed transgender people to serve openly, and in some cases paid for gender reassignment surgery.

Trump's three-tweet "policy announcement" (yes, that is a thing now) was roundly condemned for its cruelty from quarters expected and less so. It was also treated by many as a kind of Trumpian purposeful caprice (also a thing now)—as a hastily and ill-conceived, but fundamentally cynical and instrumental, ploy to distract the American public from the issues that really matter.

In a well-intentioned and sympathetic but ultimately thin and, frankly, lazy post that reflected many a media reaction, *New Yorker* editor David Remnick described Trump's tweets as a "tactical means" to "divert attention from his woes"—namely the calls to impeach him based on mounting evidence that the Trump campaign colluded with Russia to interfere with the election, as well as Trump's general incompetence and disgusting behavior. Remnick castigates the ban as "pure politics" and "cheap and cruel politics"—which raises the question if Remnick believes there is any other kind of politics, especially when it comes to this president.

Look, I get it. The Russia scandal is a big fucking deal. Transgender people are a small fraction of the overall military, and transition-related costs consume at most 0.13 percent of annual health-care expenditures for active-duty troops, all of which seems like less of a big fucking deal—unless of course you happen to be a transgender service member or vet. The manner in which Trump rolled out this reversal—apparently without consulting the Pentagon, even though he claimed he had—indicates that it was hastily planned; such haphazard actions should be expected by now. And the timing—hours after the Senate failed to repeal and replace Obamacare—suggests some sort of strategy. Moreover, Trump has a long history of using Twitter to seek nothing more than ego gratification, or to indulge in petty feuds that are, yes, also a distraction. Chaos-Evil alignments are confusing that way.

But in this case, none of these tendencies should supplant a more basic truth. First and foremost, Trump's announcement was transactional.

As both *The New York Times* and *Politico* reported, Trump intended his tweets as a sop to the far-right evangelical faction, led by Missouri Congresswoman Vicky Hartzler, which sought to bar the military from paying for transition surgery or hormone therapy for transgender service members, and which was threatening to withdraw support for Trump's promised wall along the Mexican border until their demands were met. The GOP House leadership resisted. Trump caved—or at least tried to—in a pronouncement that far exceeded Hartzler's proposal. Whether his transactional politics succeeds presumably depends on his ability to carry out his promise, which will be

challenged in the courts, as well as the conservative faction's acceptance of whatever happens next.

For those who have followed the right's anti-LGBT caucus, Hartzler is a familiar figure. In addition to being a climate-change denier, birther, and anti-choice activist, she served as a spokeswoman for Missouri's Coalition to Protect Marriage after she left the state legislature in 2000. Her anti-trans amendment was heavily backed by the Family Research Council, which like many Christian right groups has shifted to target transgender people once it resoundingly lost the fight against same-sex marriage. The Trump administration has kowtowed to this faction before, by withdrawing DoJ and DoE guidance protecting transgender students in public schools. And as Sarah Posner broke for The Nation and the Investigative Fund at the Nation Institute, the Trump administration early on considered a sweeping religious-freedom order legalizing discrimination against LGBT people, before issuing a more moderate but still alarming order. And on the same day Trump tweeted about his transgender ban, his embattled DoJ found time to file a brief in a case arguing that civil-rights law does not protect employees from sexual-orientation discrimination.

The point is that there is a well-established Christian-right base that well predates Trump and his recent troubles. Their pursuit of discriminatory, anti-LGBT policies is anything but chaotic or incidental or new, although it is evil. Trump's anti-trans announcement is one more confirmation that this group owns him.

Of course, Trump once promised at the GOP convention to "do everything in my power to protect our LGBT citizens." That pledge was made against the bogus threat of "violence and oppression of a hateful foreign ideology" (i.e., Muslims). This was indeed a calculated move, designed to weaponize one minority group against another. His proposed ban against transgender people in the military, leveraging anti-trans animus to achieve an anti-immigrant goal, confirms that he has, for now, abandoned such triangulations and gone for total social warfare.

Being at once anti-Muslim, anti-immigrant, and anti-LGBT is not a diversion from some secret Trump/Republican agenda; neither is pitting us against each other. It's what they do. It's who they are. We should know this by now.

Richard Kim

P.S.

* <https://www.thenation.com/article/donald-trumps-ban-on-transgender-troops-is-not-a-distraction/>

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