

**OPENING STATEMENT OF U.S. SENATOR ROGER F. WICKER
RANKING MEMBER, SENATE ARMED SERVICES COMMITTEE
ROOM SD-106
DIRKSEN SENATE OFFICE BUILDING
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WICKER: *Thank you, Mr. Chairman, and I would like to thank our witnesses for being here and I look forward to this hearing.*

Since October 1973, we have referred to the U.S. military as an all-volunteer force. To put it another way, past fifty years our armed services have been filled by recruits. And recruiting is not going well.

The military must devote considerable resources to attract young Americans to wear the uniform. Recruiting success is not easy, nor is it guaranteed. Without sufficient numbers of high-quality recruits, the modern American military cannot maintain the high readiness standards critical to our national security.

Although the military has experienced intermittent recruiting problems in its history, today's challenge is unprecedented. The previous low watermark for recruiting occurred in the late 1970s when the services collectively achieved 90 percent of their goals. This year, if trends continue, our armed forces are projected to achieve roughly 75 percent of active duty recruiting goals – some 15 percent lower than the 70s – and these goals are much smaller than they were in 1979. The three largest services will all miss their individual recruiting objectives, and the Army will miss the target for the third time in five years.

During the Carter Administration, in order to preserve manning levels, the military lowered recruitment standards and retained people who should have been let go. This resulted in a predictable erosion of military readiness. The only thing that saved the volunteer military was the increased defense budgets during the administration of President Reagan. We should not repeat the mistakes of those earlier years during this administration.

The recruiting challenge today is complicated, as the chair just outlined. A small and shrinking minority of young Americans are both qualified and interested in military service. Interest in military service has never been especially high, but

today only about 10 percent of young people consider putting on the uniform. This is the lowest rate on record.

There are no easy solutions to this problem, but we know what does not work. Lowering recruitment standards today leads to morale, discipline, and readiness problems tomorrow. The Army learned this lesson in the 80s and again in the early 2000s. Despite this history, the Navy seems intent on reducing standards to increase recruiting. This year, twenty percent of the Navy's recruits will come from the lowest category of scores on the Armed Forces Qualification Test. I would like Mr. Raven to explain why the Navy is following this path.

The Department of Defense must put at least as much effort into solving the recruiting crisis as it has into other initiatives like extremism; diversity, equity, and inclusion; and abortion. These initiatives are, at best, a distraction. At worst, they dissuade young people from enlisting. They suggest to the American people that the military has a problem with diversity and extremism. In truth, the military is the greatest civil rights program in the history of the world, and the data support this claim. A recent peer-reviewed study in the Quarterly Journal of Economics, finds—and I quote – “Army service closes nearly all of the Black-White earnings gap.”

The distinguished chair of this committee just said – and I agree with him – that our military is more diverse than ever before. A recent peer-reviewed study in the Quarterly Journal of Economics found enlisting in the Army increases cumulative earnings, post-secondary education, home ownership, and marriage. Here's a quote from this study “Army service closes nearly all of the Black-White earnings gap.”

And also, General Colin Powell talked some 20 years ago about great diversity accomplishments that military service has given to the United States of America.

And so, I think the evidence that is given shows that despite the good news, the military has decided to address a problem that doesn't exist – military extremism.

The Secretary of Defense created a special “Countering Extremism Working Group” and instituted a military-wide stand down day. To make the military more equitable the Department of Defense created a new Federal advisory commission and a “Defense Equity Team.” This team published, this publication: a Department of Defense “Diversity, Equity, Inclusion and Accessibility Strategic Plan,” consisting of some 27-30 pages, including attachments. And I just wonder: where is the same urgency of the Department of Defense when it comes to the very

real recruiting crisis? Where is the “Recruiting Strategic Plan?” Is one of those soon to be issued or to be ordered by the Department?

I hope our witnesses will reassure the committee that the services are taking the recruiting crisis seriously. And I hope they will speak to why all the emphasis on the lack of diversity – a problem that doesn’t apparently exist at all since we are the most successful civil rights organization in the world. And I hope we will have readiness implications at the top of our agenda rather than items that seem to be politically correct at the time.

And so I thank the witnesses today and I look to a good discussion. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.