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Trump's Chance to Do Right by Transgender Troops

By The Editorial Board
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Defense Secretary Jim Mattis, perhaps the Trump administration's most responsible national security official, may have thrown the president a political lifeline by proposing this week that transgender members of the United States military be allowed to continue serving.

The recommendation, reported by The Washington Post, would afford Mr. Trump, who has often spoken about how he values the advice of his generals, a chance to reverse his earlier cruel decision against transgender enlistees and potential recruits. In the interest of fairness, justice and a military that represents American diversity, he should seize it.

It was only a year after transgender Americans secured the right to defend their nation as equals in the military that Mr. Trump, in a series of tweets last July, summarily said he would banish them from serving.

The president, who dodged the Vietnam War with five deferments, seemed to disparage the transgender enlistees as unsuited for battle by gratuitously asserting that the military "must be focused on decisive and overwhelming victory." Since then, many have rallied to the defense of the transgender troops, including two senior Republican senators, John McCain of Arizona, who is a former P.O.W., and Orrin Hatch of Utah, plus a group of 56 retired generals and admirals.

Last fall, Gen. Joseph Dunford Jr. of the Marines, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, told the Senate Armed Services Committee that transgender troops have served with honor. "I believe any individual who meets the physical and mental standards and is worldwide deployable and is currently serving should be afforded the opportunity to continue to serve," he said.

Of course, none of that might matter in the end to Mr. Trump, whose crackdown against this minority group — there are only about 2,450 transgender troops among 1.3 million active-duty members of the military — has so far reflected obvious pandering to regressive generals and right-wing zealots, as well as knee-jerk opposition to many of the enlightened policies that his predecessor put in place.

President Obama made gender identity a protected category in the Pentagon's equal opportunity policy, ended the ban on gay recruits, opened all combat roles to women and named the first openly gay Army secretary.

Mr. Trump claimed he reimposed the transgender ban "after consultation with my generals and military experts." But General Dunford told the country's top commanders that he was not consulted and that Mr. Trump's decision to declare transgender people no longer welcome "in any capacity" was "unexpected," according to emails reported this week by BuzzFeed News.

The president, who has advocated treating transgender identity as a "disqualifying psychological and physical" condition, contrary to the views of scientific and human rights experts, has added immeasurably to the suffering of transgender people just yearning to be treated as human beings — including by being allowed to volunteer to serve their country, as only a small portion of Americans do.

Top defense officials responded to Mr. Trump's ban by slow-walking it. And after lawsuits were filed challenging the move, two federal judges late last year blocked it from taking effect, with one judge calling it most likely unconstitutional. Her decision, in October, not only halted a plan to discharge all transgender troops, it also allowed current transgender troops to re-enlist and permitted transgender recruits to join the military starting in January, a process the Pentagon has begun to implement.

While these are positive signs, a lot of uncertainty remains, including what Mr. Mattis proposes to do with transgender recruits and whether Mr. Trump is capable of changing course on this issue. Now that Mr. Mattis's recommendation has arrived at the White House, it will be up to Mr. Trump to make a final decision. It will be tragic if he clings to his prejudice, forcing transgender people out of the military and back into the shadows.