

PENTAGON

BIDEN'S SECRETARY OF DEFENSE IS MOVING TO PURGE THE MILITARY OF WHITE SUPREMACISTS

Lloyd Austin ordered a stand down across all branches of the armed forces to have a “deeper conversation” about the problem. But actually solving it will likely require more direct action.

BY ERIC LUTZ
FEBRUARY 4, 2021



Lloyd Austin arrives at the Pentagon for his first day as Defense secretary in January. SARAH SILBIO/GETTY IMAGES

Last month’s attack on Capitol Hill intensified concerns about extremism within the United States military. Though the number of current or former members of the armed forces who participated in the deadly MAGA riot is [unknown](#), an [NPR analysis](#) in late January found that as many as one in five of those charged in the wake of the insurrection had a record of military service. During his confirmation hearing for the role of **Joe Biden**’s secretary of Defense, **Lloyd Austin** vowed to root out white supremacy and right-wing radicalism in the ranks, though he provided little detail as to how that would be accomplished. “The job of the Department of Defense is to keep America safe from our enemies,” [he said](#). “But we can’t do that if some of those enemies lie within our own ranks.”

Austin, the first Black Pentagon chief, took his first major step on Wednesday toward addressing the issue, ordering a “stand down” across all branches of the armed forces over the next two months for leaders to have a “deeper conversation” about the problem. “It comes down to leadership,” he wrote. “Everyone’s.”



But the order, delivered at a meeting with military leaders and the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, also underscores the challenge of purging extremists from the armed forces: While Lloyd and Biden recognize the threat and have resolved to tackle it—a major and welcome change from the last administration—there isn’t a clear blueprint for how to do so. “We don’t know how we’re going to be able to get after this in a meaningful, productive, tangible way, and that is why he had this meeting today and that is certainly why he ordered this stand down,” Pentagon spokesman **John Kirby** [said](#) Wednesday, per NBC News.

The first task for Austin, like Biden, has been cleaning up the mess left by **Donald Trump** and his cronies—including by [clearing out](#) the hundreds of Trump loyalists his predecessor, former acting Defense Secretary **Christopher Miller**, installed in the final days of the previous administration. That’s a significant undertaking on its own. But the new administration has promised not just to return things to where they were the day before Trump took office; it has vowed real progress on multiple fronts. The military stand down is a good start, demonstrating that Austin and the administration as a whole take the issue seriously. But until there are more tangible actions toward addressing it, it’ll remain unclear how much the administration can deliver.

There have been some concrete measures proposed. **Jackie Speier**, chair of the House Armed Services Military Personnel Subcommittee, called on Biden, Austin, and Director of National Intelligence **Avril Haines** to direct agencies to screen the social media histories of military recruits and those seeking security clearances for extremism. “The screening processes for servicemembers and others in critical national security positions are outdated,” Speier wrote in a [letter](#) last week. “Modernizing background investigations to bring them in line with these new realities should be among your highest priorities as the new administration commences.” Implementing such a policy could go a long way toward keeping white supremacists and other radicals out of the military. But, of course, it doesn’t fully address the threat posed by those already in the ranks. “There wasn’t one being in the room that didn’t agree that there [was] a problem,” Kirby said of Austin’s meeting with Pentagon leaders Wednesday.

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BY ERIC LUTZ

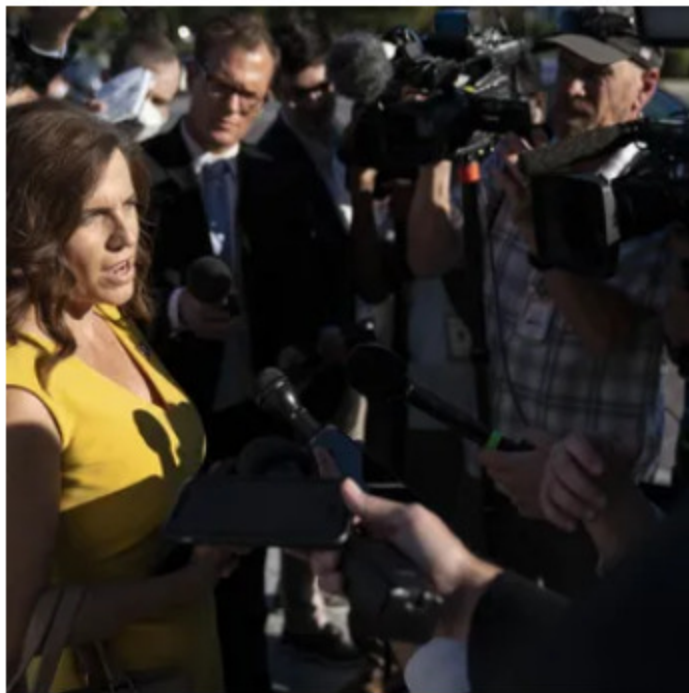


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BY ERIC LUTZ



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