



THIS WEEK'S FEATURE

The Pentagon Will Test Your Testosterone. It Won't Test Its Own Investigators.

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What a new Pentagon testosterone policy reveals about who gets the benefit of the doubt, and who gets told to deal with it.

Every few weeks, someone tells us the same thing. It shows up in a comment under a LinkedIn post, in an email from a congressional staffer, in the polite skepticism of a reporter on the phone. We describe a service member investigated without ever being told what for, or an officer whose career ended over a General Officer Memorandum of Reprimand issued without a hearing, and the reply comes back almost on cue: “They knew what they were getting into. They signed the contract. Nobody made them join.”

We hear this most often, and most pointedly, not from strangers to military life but from the people inside it — current service members, veterans, and military families. That's worth sitting with. The people closest to a system are often its most reliable defenders, even when the defense doesn't survive five minutes of scrutiny.

This week gave us a clean test case.

A POLICY BUILT ON “WE DIDN'T KNOW”

On July 15, Secretary of War Pete Hegseth announced that the Department of War will now require every active-duty and reserve service member age 30 and older to be screened annually for testosterone deficiency, folded into the periodic health assessment they already complete. Troops under 30 can request the screening voluntarily. Hegseth framed the initiative, branded “High-T,” as an investment in what he called “warfighter readiness” and the department's obligation to give troops “the world's best medical care.” Whether an individual pursues testosterone replacement therapy after a diagnosis remains, notably, his or her own choice.

The reaction from current and former service members has been telling. Scroll the comments and you'll find no shortage of men saying, in effect: I had no idea the job did this to my body. Nobody told me that years in EOD, or in a career field built on chronic sleep deprivation and stress, would quietly wreck my hormones. I'm glad somebody's finally paying attention.

Sit with that admission for a second, because it is exactly the admission our clients make. A young person takes on a job without a real accounting of what it will cost them physically, psychologically, or professionally — because nobody sat them down and explained it, because they were nineteen, because “informed consent” isn't part of the recruiting pitch. When that gap shows up as a hormone panel, the institution's response is sympathy and a new screening program.



When that same gap shows up as a service member who didn't understand the administrative system that would later end their career, the institution's response is: you volunteered.

WHAT DID ANY OF US ACTUALLY KNOW?

I enlisted in 1997 at seventeen years old. I could not have told you what the Uniform Code of Military Justice was. I had never heard the phrase “dual sovereignty” and had no idea it meant the same conduct could be prosecuted twice, once by the military and once by a civilian court, without it counting as double jeopardy. I didn't know what an Article 15-6 investigation was, or that a General Officer Memorandum of Reprimand could end a career without anything resembling a trial. I didn't know what due process was supposed to look like inside a system that operates largely outside the courts most Americans recognize. Nobody explained any of it, because explaining it was never the point of a recruiting station.

So when someone tells a whistleblower or a wrongly investigated service member that they “knew what they signed up for,” the honest answer is: no, they didn't, and neither did I, and neither, it turns out, did the thousands of men currently thanking the Pentagon for finally noticing what their careers did to their bodies. The logic runs in exactly one direction. It excuses the institution when the fix is cheap and flattering. It blames the individual when the fix would cost the institution something.

THE DIFFERENCE IS POWER, NOT PRINCIPLE

Here is the pattern underneath the pattern. In the culture this policy is speaking to, testosterone is shorthand for strength, dominance, the “warrior ethos” the Department of War has spent the last year branding itself around. Restoring it restores an image of power — to the individual service member, and to an institution eager to be seen investing in its warfighters. It costs the chain of command nothing. No commander loses discretion. No investigating officer answers to a new standard. It's an easy yes.

Fixing administrative injustice is a different kind of fix. Mandatory timelines on investigations, a real standard of evidence before a career-ending letter goes in a file, independence for inspectors general from the chains of command they investigate — these don't restore power to the institution. They redistribute it, away from commanders and investigators who currently exercise enormous discretion with very little check, and toward the service member standing in front of them. That's not a readiness investment. That's an accountability investment. And accountability is a much harder sell to the people who currently benefit from not having any.

That's the whole difference. It was never really about whether an eighteen-year-old can be expected to understand the fine print of what they signed. Hegseth's own policy concedes they can't — that's the entire justification for testing men who had no idea their jobs were costing them something. It's about whether fixing the gap requires anyone currently holding power to give any of it up.

WHAT CONSISTENCY WOULD ACTUALLY LOOK LIKE

We're not opposed to a testosterone screening program. If it helps service members, good. But an institution doesn't get to discover, mid-career, that people didn't fully understand what a job would cost them, treat that discovery as compassion when it's about hormones, and treat the identical discovery as an excuse for silence when it's about due process.

Real consistency would mean two things. First, actually informing people what they're signing up for — not just the physical toll, but the legal one. Give recruits a plain-language walkthrough of the UCMJ, dual sovereignty, the investigative process, and what a GOMOR or an Article 15-6 can do to a career, before they raise their right hand, not after their file is



already closed. Second, when the system fails people who genuinely didn't know, respond the way the Department is responding to testosterone deficiency: fix the system. Not "you should have known." Fix it.

That is the entire premise behind the Military Investigative Competency Enhancement Act that Walk the Talk Foundation continues to press in both chambers: mandatory training for IG and IO personnel, independence from the chains of command they investigate, centralized credentialing, and enforceable timelines. It is not a radical ask. It is the same ask the Pentagon just made of itself when it decided that "nobody told them" was a reason to act, not a reason to shrug.

If we're going to take care of the people who signed the contract, we don't get to pick and choose which parts of "you knew what you were getting into" we actually believe.

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