

United States Senate

WASHINGTON, DC 20510-0309

March 24, 2025

The Honorable Pete Hegseth
Secretary of Defense
Department of Defense
1000 Defense Pentagon
Washington, DC 20301

Dear Secretary Hegseth,

We write to you today to urge you to immediately reinstate all of the information and references pertaining to Marine Corps Pfc. Ira Hayes and Army Specialist Lori Ann Piestewa on the Department of Defense's webpages, as well as other references related to the historical impacts Native American veterans played in keeping our country safe. Native Americans serve in the United States military at five times the rate of the national average and have made significant contributions to our nation's national security. To erase Pfc. Hayes's and Specialist Piestewa's contributions to our history is to erase American history.

A February 26, 2025, memorandum entitled, "Digital Content Refresh," required DoD components to remove all DoD digital platforms of content that "promote[s] Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion[.]" While implementing this memorandum, DoD erased important military history, including references to Pfc. Hayes and Specialist Piestewa.

Pfc. Ira Hayes enlisted in the Marine Corps in 1942. He was an enrolled member of the Gila River Indian Community. Pfc. Hayes was one of six Marines who valiantly raised the United States flag at Iwo Jima in 1945 after a prolonged battle during World War II. This event was captured and memorialized by photographer Joe Rosenthal in the historic photo titled, *Raising the Flag on Iwo Jima*. This photograph honors all those who served in WWII and embodies the United States' victory.

Army Specialist Lori Ann Piestewa enlisted in the Army in 2001. In 2003, Specialist Piestewa made the ultimate sacrifice for this country. In doing so, she was the first American service woman killed in combat in Operation Iraqi Freedom. Specialist Piestewa was also the first Hopi woman and the first Native American woman to die in foreign combat in the service of the United States.

According to your Department, many webpages were erroneously removed from public view due to AI programming and potentially overzealous decisions to label the content as "DEI." On Friday, March 21, 2025, Chief Pentagon Spokesman Sean Parnell stated that "history is not DEI," yet, despite calls for the reinstatement of content about Pfc. Hayes's and Specialist

Piestewa's heroism, the pages have yet to be restored. The Department claims it plans to restore content it deems "mistakenly removed or, in other cases, [...] can be edited to make it eligible for reposting." However, these remedies do not alleviate the harm caused by your Department's implementation of the Digital Content Refresh memorandum.

We strongly urge you to re-evaluate the Department's implementation process of the February 26, 2025, memorandum. The Department claims these erasures of our nation's heroes from its online public platforms are a mistake that will be corrected over time, but it's an error with resounding impacts. DoD appears to be taking a slash and burn approach, removing web pages and only restoring them when the public holds the Department accountable. This approach is wasteful and creates unnecessary distractions from the Department's important missions.

Sincerely,



Mark Kelly
United States Senator



Ruben Gallego
United States Senator