

POLITICO Pro Q&A: Rep. Jackie Speier

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The #MeToo movement exposed cracks in the military's handling of sexual assault this year, and Rep. [Jackie Speier](#) says she is making it a priority to address those failures.

As the chair of the House Armed Services Military Personnel Subcommittee, the California Democrat is a leading advocate in Congress for military justice reform and women's equality. She most recently introduced the "I Am Vanessa Guillén" Act, [H.R. 8270 \(116\)](#), that would make sexual harassment a crime under the Uniform Code of Military Justice and establish an independent group of sexual harassment investigators.

The bipartisan legislation is named in honor of Army Spc. Vanessa Guillén, who was killed at Fort Hood in Texas in April. Speier led a [congressional delegation to the base](#) last month, which she said revealed an overall lack of accountability.

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Her subcommittee [launched a joint investigation](#) with the House Oversight Committee Sept. 8 to probe the recent deaths of soldiers stationed at Fort Hood. Speier said while Army leaders have been cooperative so far, they have not turned over documents the committees requested that were due Oct. 2.

Speier spoke to POLITICO about her visit to Fort Hood, her reaction to President Donald Trump's recent vow to reverse [a move by the Navy SEALs to make its ethos gender neutral](#) and how the confirmation of Amy Coney Barrett to the Supreme Court could affect sexual assault cases. As the author of an amendment to the [defense appropriations bill](#) that would overturn Trump's transgender ban, Speier also spoke about its prospects under a Biden administration.

This transcript has been edited for length and clarity.

The Army had an Oct. 2 deadline to turn over documents in response to the letter you and Oversight National Security Subcommittee Chair [Stephen Lynch](#) sent to the Army secretary, related to the recent deaths at Fort Hood. Have they met that deadline today?

I would say that the Army secretary has been cooperative. To my knowledge, the documentation has not been turned over yet.

What surprised you, if anything, while on the congressional delegation you led to Fort Hood?

We're going to be developing a report over a period of time. We're going to make another visit down to Fort Hood in about three to four months to see what kind of changes the new commander has made. I think overarching was the morale, the safety and the overarching lack of cohesiveness that we witnessed. One of the statements that was made is that military careers go to die at Fort Hood. That's a very strong statement. I think it even alarmed the general when I recounted what someone had said. The safety issues on the base were a concern to us, and there's a lack of overall accountability.

We actually visited Vanessa Guillén's room and the barrack was in horrible condition. I think there was just a lack of urgency throughout her disappearance in terms of communicating with the family, in communicating with law enforcement and with doing criminal investigation.

The results were that there were a lot of unanswered questions for a long time. And the truth of the matter is, had there not been a contractor building a fence literally under one of the graves of Vanessa's remains, we would not even know today where she was.

What are some of the factors that have allowed this lack of accountability to persist?

We've got to do a better job of creating safety on the base. We need cameras at the arms rooms. We probably need the equivalent of Ring doorbell bells on the housing units. We need to create a requirement that the military does not automatically assume that a missing soldier is AWOL because that really prevents local law enforcement from helping for 30 days. That's how you ended up getting all these cold cases.

Do you have any update on when the I Am Vanessa Guillén bill will hit the House floor?

It will be taken up when we return in November. It now has I think close to 175 co-sponsors. About 25 of them are Republicans. It addresses some of the issues, but certainly not all of the issues.

So, what we heard from many of the family members is the Army [Criminal Investigation Division] telling them, "Stop calling us." We've got to change that mindset. These families have a right to know. They have a right to be in contact with the investigators. They're not numbers — they're individuals.

One of the things the major general said is that what he wants to communicate to his troops is that, "I'm here to take care of you." Well, if that's part of what he's communicating, that has to be felt everywhere. Otherwise, why would any family want to allow their young son or daughter to join the military when they're at greater risk in the military, from someone within the service, than they are from the enemy outside.

How quickly could the transgender troop ban be overturned under a Biden administration and do you think it has any hope of being overturned under the current administration?

The mean-spirited, unjustified position by the Trump administration to overturn the Obama executive order is so wrongheaded. First of all, there was ostensibly a waiver process that, for all intents and purposes, it's not a waiver process at all. I think there have been two waiver requests, that they've even contemplated and not one of them was accepted. And I think there's only been one at all, that's been actually granted.

Having had a hearing on this issue, the first one ever, where the service members who were trans came and testified, they're phenomenal service members. It needs to be addressed. The arguments were bogus to begin with. [Under Biden, I think a reversal] would happen quite quickly. I think it would be reversed within months.

What was your reaction to the news of Trump vowing to overturn the gender-neutral Navy SEAL ethos and have you heard anything more about this?

No, I haven't [heard anything about this]. Nothing really surprises me about this president with the exception of the fact that he's contracted Covid-19. He only takes these steps and signs these [executive orders] for his own personal gain. It has nothing to do with the importance of the policy. Whether it's right, wrong. It's to appeal to a very small sliver of America and to somehow cement their support and he ignores the rest of the country and that's probably going to be his greatest downfall.

If Amy Coney Barrett is confirmed to the Supreme Court, do you think it would have an effect on any other military-related decisions?

If Judge Barrett's interest in wanting to give greater rights to college campuses is a reflection of her general policies around sexual assault, that would be troubling to me, but I don't think they have that much to go off quite yet.

A [report in March](#) from the National Commission on Military, National and Public Service recommended that women should be eligible for the draft. What action will you take on the report's recommendations, if any?

National service is something that we need to look at and I think that it's important for men and women to participate. For all of our talk about wanting women to be equal to men, that requires equal on all levels. I'm supportive of national service. I'm supportive of men and women being required to participate in the Selective Service system. And in all likelihood in the early part of next year, we'll have a hearing generally on Selective Service recommendations and looking at what a national service requirement would be.