

No. \_\_-\_\_\_\_

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**In the Supreme Court of the United States**

ISRAEL ALVARADO, *ET AL.*,  
*Petitioners,*

v.

LLOYD AUSTIN, III, *ET AL.*,  
*Respondents.*

ON PETITION FOR WRIT OF *CERTIORARI*  
TO THE U.S. COURT OF APPEALS  
FOR THE FOURTH CIRCUIT

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**APPENDIX**

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**APPENDIX**

*Israel v. Austin*, No. 23-1419 (4th Cir. Aug. 3, 2023)..... 1a

*Israel v. Austin*, No. 1:22-cv-0876-AJT-JFA (E.D. Va. Nov. 23, 2022) (dismissal) ..... 3a

*Israel v. Austin*, No. 1:22-cv-0876-AJT-JFA (E.D. Va. Feb. 17, 2023) (reconsideration) 28a

*Israel v. Austin*, No. 1:22-cv-0876-AJT-JFA (E.D. Va. July 3, 2023) (amended judgment)..... 41a

*Israel v. Austin*, No. 1:22-cv-0876-AJT-JFA (E.D. Va. Oct. 23, 2023) (revised judgment)..... 43a

U.S. CONST. art. VI, cl. 3..... 44a

U.S. CONST. amend. I..... 44a

U.S. CONST. amend. V..... 44a

5 U.S.C. § 555(b) ..... 44a

5 U.S.C. § 555(e)..... 45a

5 U.S.C. § 702..... 45a

5 U.S.C. § 704..... 46a

10 U.S.C. § 632..... 47a

42 U.S.C. § 2000bb-1..... 49a

42 U.S.C. § 2000bb-3..... 50a

National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2013, PUB. L. No. 112-239, § 533(a)-(b), 126 Stat. 1632, 1727 (2013), as amended by National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2014, PUB. L. No. 113-66, § 532(a), 127 Stat. 672, 759 (2013)..... 50a

James M. Inhofe National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2023, PUB. L. NO. 117-263, § 525, 136 Stat. 2395, 2571-72 (2022) .....	51a
Memorandum, Secretary of Defense, Rescission of August 24, 2021, and November 30, 2021, Coronavirus Disease 2019 Vaccination Requirements for Members of the Armed Forces (Jan. 10, 2023).....	52a

1a

FILED: AUGUST 3, 2023

UNITED STATES COURT OF APPEALS  
FOR THE FOURTH CIRCUIT

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**NO. 23-1419**  
**(1:22-CV-00876-AJT-JFA)**

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ISRAEL ALVARADO; STEVEN BARFIELD; WALTER BROBST; JUSTIN BROWN; DAVID CALGER; MARK COX; JACOB EASTMAN; THOMAS FUSSELL; NATHANAEL GENTILHOMME; DOYLE HARRIS; JEREMIAH HENDERSON; ANDREW HIRKO; KRISTA INGRAM; RYAN JACKSON; JOSHUA LAYFIELD; JAMES LEE; BRAD LEWIS; ROBERT NELSON; RICK PAK; RANDY POGUE; GERARDO RODRIGUEZ; PARKER SCHNETZ; RICHARD SHAFFER; JONATHAN SHOUR; JEREMIAH SNYDER; DAVID TROYER; SETH WEAVER; THOMAS WITHERS; JUSTIN WINE; MATTHEW WRONSKI; JERRY YOUNG; BRENTON C. ASBURY; JORDAN BALLARD; CHAD BOOTH; JEREMIAH BOTELLO; CLAYTON DILTZ; MICHAEL HART; JACOB LAWRENCE; LANCE SCHRADER; JONATHAN ZAGDANSKI,

Plaintiffs - Appellants,

v.

LLOYD J. AUSTIN, III, in his official capacity as Secretary of Defense, U.S. Department of Defense; FRANK KENDALL, in his official capacity as Secretary of the Air Force, Department of the Air Force; CARLOS DEL TORO, in his official capacity as Secretary of the Navy, Department of the Navy; CHRISTINE

WORMUTH, in her official capacity as Secretary of the Army, Department of the Army; XAVIER BECERRA, in his official capacity as Secretary, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services; ROBERT CALIFF, M.D., in his official capacity as Commissioner of the U.S. Food and Drug Administration; ROCHELLE WALENSKY, in her official capacity as Director, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention,

Defendants - Appellees.

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**ORDER**

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Upon review of the submissions relative to the motion to dismiss, the court grants the motion and dismisses this appeal as moot. The court vacates the district court's orders denying the preliminary injunction, dismissing the complaint, and denying reconsideration and remands the case to the district court with directions to dismiss as moot. *See United States v. Munsingwear, Inc.*, 340 U.S. 36, 39-40 (1950); *Hirschfeld v. Bureau of Alcohol, Firearms, Tobacco & Explosives*, 14 F.4th 322, 327-328 (4th Cir. 2021).

The motion for oral argument is denied.

Entered at the direction of the panel: Judge Gregory, Judge Harris, and Judge Rushing.

For the Court

/s/ Patricia S. Connor, Clerk

**IN THE UNITED STATES DISTRICT COURT  
FOR THE EASTERN DISTRICT OF VIRGINIA  
Alexandria Division**

ISRAEL ALVARADO, <i>et al.</i> ,	)	
	<i>Plaintiffs,</i>	
	)	
v.	)	
LLOYD AUSTIN, III, <i>et al.</i> ,	)	Case No.: I :22-cv-876
	<i>Defendants.</i>	(AJT/JF A)
	)	

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**ORDER**

Plaintiffs have moved for a Preliminary Injunction (the "Motion")<sup>1</sup> [Doc. No. 59] to enjoin Defendants, executive branch officials, from enforcing the military's vaccine directive or taking any adverse action against Plaintiffs, a proposed class of military chaplains, on the basis of any Plaintiffs refusal to vaccinate against COVID-19. After full briefing, on September 28, 2022 the Court held a hearing on the Motion. After the hearing, Plaintiffs Moved for Leave to File Supplemental Evidence [Doc. No. 74], which the Court granted [Doc. No. 77]. That supplemental evidence was further briefed [Doc. Nos. 80, 81]. After full consideration of the briefings and arguments, for the following reasons, the Motion is **DENIED** and the Complaint **DISMISSED** *sua sponte* for lack of subject-matter jurisdiction based on non-justiciability.

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<sup>1</sup> Plaintiffs' Memorandum in Support of the Motion [Doc. No. 60] shall be referred to as "Mem.," Defendants' Opposition in Response to the Motion [Doc. No. 64] shall be referred to as "Opp.," and Plaintiffs' Reply to the Opposition [Doc. No. 66] shall be referred to as "Reply."

## I. BACKGROUND

### A. Parties

Plaintiffs are forty-two<sup>2</sup> active duty and reserve military chaplains seeking to represent a purported class of more than 100 chaplains in opposition to the COVID-19 vaccine directive (the "Directive") issued by Department of Defense ("DoD") Secretary Lloyd Austin, III. In addition to Secretary Austin, Plaintiffs name the Secretary of the Navy, Secretary of the Army, Secretary of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services ("HHS"), Acting Commissioner of the U.S. Food and Drug Administration ("FDA"), and Director of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention ("CDC"), all in their official capacities. Plaintiffs allege the Directive and its subsequent implementation and enforcement, along with a CDC definitional change, have triggered statutory and constitutional violations. Consequently, Plaintiffs seek to preliminarily enjoin the Directive and secure other injunctive remedies for the alleged violations.

### B. Impact of COVID-19 on the Armed Forces

Amid a global pandemic that has killed more than a million Americans, the Department of Defense ("DoD") implemented policies that it claims were based on senior military leaders' judgment related to force readiness and aimed at "reducing the risk of infections, hospitalizations, and deaths among service members." Opp. 1-2. More than 400,000 servicemembers have contracted COVID-19 and ninety-six have died. *Id.* at 2. Of those who died, only two were fully vaccinated. *Id.* And while no active

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<sup>2</sup> The Complaint originally named thirty-one Plaintiffs. Compl. ¶¶ 28 - 58. Eleven additional chaplains were later joined as Plaintiffs under Fed. R. Civ. P. 20(a). [Doc. No. 68].

duty servicemembers have died from COVID-19 since late last year,<sup>3</sup> Mem. 6, serious illness, outbreaks, and/or long-haul COVID adversely affect military operations, Opp. 2.

### **C. The Directive, Implementation, and Objections**

After previewing an upcoming COVID-19 vaccine requirement two weeks prior, on August 24, 2021, the day after the FDA granted final approval of the Pfizer vaccine, Secretary Austin issued the Directive to require full vaccination against COVID-19 for all members of the armed forces.<sup>4</sup> Opp. 3. Following the Directive, the Army, Navy, and Air Force issued implementation guidance and set vaccination deadlines. *Id.* The guidance established exemptions for medical,<sup>5</sup> administrative,<sup>6</sup> and religious purposes. *Id.* at 4. A servicemember's application for a religious exemption is called a Religious Accommodation Request ("RAR").

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<sup>3</sup> It is worth noting that the last death occurred not long after the Directive was issued.

<sup>4</sup> DoD presently requires all service members to receive nine vaccines as part of its immunization program, with an additional eight vaccinations possible depending on a servicemember's elevated risk factors. Opp. 3. The immunization program is part of DoD's "Individual Medical Readiness" requirement for service and mobilization efforts. *Id.*

<sup>5</sup> Medical exemptions include, *inter alia* pregnancy, if a service member has COVID-19, or a medical contraindication for the vaccine. *Id.* at 4. Plaintiffs argue the medical exemption should recognize immunity from a documented prior COVID-19 infection. Mem. 5-6.

<sup>6</sup> Examples of administrative exemptions include those "for members who are missing or who are on terminal leave in anticipation of separation." Opp. 4.



While exact procedures vary, each service branch has a process for RARs that includes (a) an appeals process; (b) input from another chaplain, medical professional, the requesting service member, and the commanding officer; and (c) review by a senior military leader. *Id* Some RARs have been approved,<sup>7</sup> *id.* at 4, but Plaintiffs assert that the few approved RARs are limited to servicemembers "already programed for retirement or separation," Mem. 10.

When active duty servicemembers refuse vaccination and have not been granted an exemption, administrative discharge proceedings are initiated.<sup>8</sup> Opp. 5. While procedures vary by department, in the Navy, Marine Corp, and Air Force, such proceedings take a minimum of several months to complete and do not necessarily conclude with termination. *Id* However, where they do end with termination, an Honorable or General (under honorable conditions) Discharge is issued. *Id* And even after discharge, additional remedies are available. *Id.* In the Air Force, prior to a possible discharge, servicemembers out of compliance and without an exemption are placed in a no pay/no points status and involuntarily

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<sup>7</sup> As reflected in the citations in Defendants' brief, as of July 7, 2022, there have been 7,701 RARs for the Active Anny, Anny National Guard, and Army Reserve, and 19 have been granted. *Id.* For the Navy, as of August 24, 2022, there have been 4,251 RARs for the Active Duty and Reserve members, and 47 have been granted. *Id* Air Force numbers are not discernible because RARs are considered a subset of administrative exemptions, and only total administrative exemptions are reported. *Id.*

<sup>8</sup> As represented by the parties, such proceedings are presently "largely enjoined" for the Navy, Air Force, and Marine Corps. *Id* at 5.

reassigned to the Individual Ready Reserve.<sup>9</sup> *Id.* at 6. In the Army, no guidance regarding a discharge process has yet been issued, though DoD does not provide funding for pay for unvaccinated Army National Guard or Reserve members who do not have an approved or pending exemption request. *Id.* at 5. Additionally, Army National Guard and Reserve troops in this category are not permitted to participate in drills, training, or other duties. *Id.* at 5-6.

With respect to the Directive, Plaintiffs lodge personal objections to the vaccine on a variety of religious and secular grounds, none of which require, given the basis for the Court's ruling discussed below, that the Court assess the military, religious, ethical or scientific basis for those objections.

#### **D. Religious Accommodation Requests and Alleged "No Accommodation Policy"**

Plaintiffs allege that DoD established a "No Accommodation Policy," or "Categorical RA Ban." Mem. 9. They largely base their allegations on information and belief and their own declarations, along with a two-page memorandum purportedly from DoD's Acting Inspector General and the declaration of a Navy servicemember who is not a plaintiff in this case. *Id.*; Compl. ¶¶ 97-101; Mem. 9-11 & n.19; Mem. Ex. 9; *see generally* Mot. for Leave to File Supp. Evid. [Doc. No. 74]; Reply to Def. Resp. to Mot. for Leave to File Supp. Evid. [Doc. No. 81]. Plaintiffs further argue that because the language in denial letters is similar and because only senior military officials serve as the

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<sup>9</sup> The Individual Ready Reserve ("IRR") allows servicemembers to transfer and complete their remaining service obligation rather than be discharged. *Id.* at 6.

final adjudicatory authority, RAR results are predetermined. Mem. 9-10. Defendants deny the existence of a wholesale RAR rejection policy and assert that RARs are individually considered. Opp. 18.

### **E. Alleged Harm to Unvaccinated Chaplains for Refusing to Vaccinate**

Plaintiffs allege that because they refuse to comply with the Directive, they have been denied promotion, schooling, training, and assignments. Mem. 10. Further, they allege First Amendment violations and other harms on account of their exclusion from the RAR process,<sup>10</sup> compelled speech, hostile work environment, ostracization/isolation/stigmatization, futility of the RAR process, retaliation, and censorship/self-censorship. *Id.* at 10-11, Ex. 11. Plaintiffs also allege they were "coerce[d] and coopt[ed] [] to be complicit in these constitutional violations" by allegedly receiving scripts to recite "government-endorsed positions" when counseling other servicemembers on religious objections to the vaccine. *Id.* at 11. Plaintiffs also assert a variety of adverse employment or disciplinary consequences that either have or could result from their refusal to comply with the Directive. *Id.* at 12. In total, Plaintiffs assert nine causes of action based on alleged violations of statutory and constitutional provisions.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Presumably, Plaintiffs refer to their exclusion from the RAR process to mean their exclusion from being permitted to be the consulting chaplain on *other* servicemembers RARs, not from their exclusion in the process for their own RARs.

<sup>11</sup> Plaintiffs assert the following causes of action: [¶] Counts I and II: National Defense Authorization Act § 533 [¶] Count III: Religious Freedom Restoration Act [¶] Count IV: Article VI and

## F. Treatment by Other Courts

As compared to similar cases where servicemembers (though not chaplains) have sought preliminary injunctive relief related to the Directive, the vast majority of courts as of the Parties' briefing have denied preliminary relief (or dismissed the claims),<sup>12</sup> while significantly fewer have preliminarily

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Establishment Clause [¶] Count V: Free Exercise Clause [¶] Count VI: Free Speech and Right to Petition Clauses [¶] Count VII: Fifth Amendment Due Process [¶] Count VIII: Administrative Procedure Act [¶] Count IX: Separation of Powers

<sup>12</sup> See, e.g., *Millerv. Austin*, No. 22-cv-118, 2022 WL 3584666, at \*1-2 (D. Wyo. Aug. 22, 2022) (denying preliminary injunction for lack of standing); *Abbott v. Biden*, No. 6:22-3, 2022 WL 2287547, at \*6 (E.D. Tex. June 24, 2022) (denying preliminary injunction because of, *inter alia*, deference afforded to the military); *Knick v. Austin*, No. 22- 1267, 2022 WL 2157066, at \*1 (D.D.C. June 15, 2022) (denying preliminary injunction and declining "to meddle prematurely in the military's decision-making regarding personnel readiness"); *Creaghan v. Austin*, No. 22-981, 2022 WL 1500544, at \*I, 6 (D.D.C. May 12, 2022) (denying preliminary injunction and noting "military and scientific justiciability concerns"); *Navy Seal I v. Austin*, No. 22-688, 2022 WL 1294486, at \*1, 6 (D.D.C. Apr. 29, 2022) (denying preliminary injunction and expressing concerns that the claims "may be nonjusticiable"); *Short v. Berger*, No. cv-22-444, 2022 WL 1203876, at \*16 (D. Ariz. Apr. 22, 2022) (denying preliminary injunction and noting "serious questions as to justiciability"); *Vance v. Wormuth*, No. · 3:21-cv-730, 2022 WL 1094665, at · 7 (W.D. Ky. Apr. 12, 2022) (granting a motion to dismiss for want of subject-matter jurisdiction); *Roberts v. Roth*, No. 21-1797, 2022 WL 834148, at \*1 (D.D.C. Mar. 21, 2022) (dismissing the case for want of subject-matter jurisdiction); *Short v. Berger*, No. cv-22-1151, 2022 WL 1051852, at \*6 (C.D. Cal. Mar. 3, 2022) (applying the *Mindes* test and denying preliminary injunction on justiciability grounds); *Robert v. Austin*, No. 21-cv-2228, 2022 WL 103374, at \*3 (D. Colo. Jan. 11, 2022) (denying preliminary injunction and dismissing the case for want of subject-matter

enjoined either the vaccine requirement or the military from taking any adverse actions against those plaintiffs. Opp. 8-9. There have been no such cases within the Fourth Circuit. *Id.* And while no case has reached the Supreme Court for full consideration, the Supreme Court, as discussed below, has stayed one district court's issuance of a preliminary injunction that would have precluded the Navy from considering "vaccination status in making deployment, assignment, and other operational decisions." *Austin v. U.S. Navy Seals 1-26*, 142 S. Ct. 1301, 1301 (2022).

## II. LEGAL PRINCIPLES

Plaintiffs seek a preliminary injunction, which the Supreme Court has described as "an extraordinary remedy never awarded as of right." *Winter v. Nat. Res. Def Council, Inc.*, 555 U.S. 7, 24 (2008). Preliminary injunctions are "very far-reaching power[s] to be granted only sparingly and in limited circumstances." *MicroStrategy Inc. v. Motorola*, 245 F.3d 335,339 (4th Cir. 2001) (quoting *Direx Israel, ltd. V. Breakthrough Med. Corp.*, 952 F.2d 802, 816 (4th Cir. 1991)). To obtain relief, a plaintiff must show all four of the following factors: "[1] he is likely to succeed on the merits, [2] that he is likely to suffer irreparable harm in the absence of preliminary relief, [3] that the balance of equities tips in his favor, and [4] that an injunction is in the public interest." *Winter*, 555 U.S. at 20. The first two factors are most important. *Maryland Undercoating Co. v. Payne*, 603 F.2d 477,482 n.12 (4th Cir. 1979); *see also*

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jurisdiction); *Church v. Biden*, 573 F. Supp. 3d 118, 137-38 (D.D.C. 2021) (finding servicemembers' claims to be non-justiciable).

*Blackwelder Furniture Co. of Statesville, Inc. v. Sei/ig Mfg. Co.*, 550 F.2d 189, 195 (4th Cir. 1977) (finding that if irreparable injury is only "possible," then the probability of success can be the decisive inquiry). The party moving for the preliminary injunction carries the burden of establishing each factor by a "clear showing." *Hardnett v. M&T Bank*, 204 F. Supp. 3d 851, 862 (E.D. Va. 2016) (quoting in part *Winter*, 555 U.S. at 22).

Traditionally, the Supreme Court has afforded deference to the military over military decisions, free from judicial interference. *See Gilligan v. Morgan*, 413 U.S. 1, 10 (1973) ("The complex[,] subtle, and professional decisions as to the composition, training, equipping, and control of a military force are essentially professional judgments") and *Goldman v. Weinberger*, 475 U.S. 503, 507 (1986) ("[W]hen evaluating whether military needs justify a particular restriction on religiously motivated conduct, courts must give great deference to the professional judgment of military authorities"); *see also Solorio v. United States*, 483 U.S. 435, 448 (1987) ("[W]e have adhered to [the] principle of deference in a variety of contexts where ... the constitutional rights of servicemen were implicated"); *Schlesinger v. Ballard*, 419 U.S. 498, 510 (1975) ("It is the primary business of armies and navies to fight or be ready to fight wars should the occasion arise ... [and] [t]he responsibility for determining how best our Armed Forces shall attend to that business rests" outside the judiciary) (quoting in part *U.S. ex rel. Toth v. Quarles*, 350 U.S. 11, 17 (1955)).

### III. ANALYSIS

Plaintiffs' likelihood of success on the merits

necessarily requires an evaluation into whether the Court can exercise its jurisdiction. Accordingly, the Court must first evaluate the likelihood that Plaintiffs' claims are justiciable. Defendants argue Plaintiffs' claims are non-justiciable because they (1) amount to a review of military assignment and operational decisions, (2) fail to exhaust administrative remedies,<sup>13</sup> and (3) do not satisfy the four-factor test articulated in *Mindes v. Seaman*, 453 F.2d 197 (5th Cir. 1971) (the "*Mindes* test").

#### **A. Review of Military Assignment and Operational Decisions**

Plaintiffs seek injunctive relief to enjoin (1) the Directive's implementation, (2) Defendants' purported retaliation, (3) any punitive or administrative action from being taken against Plaintiffs, and (4) compliance with various statutory and constitutional provisions. Mot. 1. But such injunctive relief clearly raises the specter of a non-justiciable, improper intrusion into military affairs. *See Winter*, 555 U.S. at 24 (reversing the district court's grant of a preliminary injunction because, *inter alia*, the "complex[,] subtle, and professional decisions as to the composition, training, equipping, and control of a military force [] are essentially professional military judgments") (citation and quotations omitted); *see*

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<sup>13</sup> Exhaustion is considered the second threshold requirement that must be satisfied as an initial matter before reaching the four-factor *Mindes* test, the first being that there exists an allegation of a constitutional, statutory, or military regulation violation. *Mindes v. Seaman*, 453 F.2d 197,201 (5th Cir. 1971); *see also Williams v. Wilson*, 162 F.2d 357, 360 (4th Cir. 1985) (noting a plaintiffs failure "to satisfy the second *Mindes* threshold requirement of exhaustion of available intraservice remedies"). Here, the first threshold requirement is satisfied.

also *Gilligan*, 413 U.S. at 10 ("[I]t is difficult to conceive of an area of governmental activity in which the courts have less competence [than] . . . professional military judgments."); *Orloff v. Willoughby*, 345 U.S. 83, 93 (1953) ("[J]udges are not given the task of running the Army."); *Harkness v. Sec'y of the Navy*, 858 F.3d 437,443 (6th Cir. 2017) ("[C]ourts are generally reluctant to review claims involving military duty assignments ... [due to] lack of expertise, deference to the unique role of the military in our constitutional structure, and the practical difficulties that would arise if every military duty assignment was open to judicial review.") (internal quotations and citations omitted).

Critically, in a recent military vaccine case the Supreme Court has stayed a district court's order "preclud[ing] the Navy from considering respondents' vaccination status in making deployment, assignment, and other operational decisions." *U.S. Navy Seals 1-26*, 142 S. Ct. at 1302. In that case, Justice Kavanaugh's concurrence pointedly noted that "the President of the United States, not any federal judge, is the Commander in Chief of the Armed Forces" and that there was no basis to "employ[] the judicial power in a manner that military commanders believe would impair the military." *Id.* at 1302 (Kavanaugh, J. concurring).

Plaintiffs argue their claims are justiciable by first citing *Winters v. United States*, 89 S. Ct. 57 (1968) (Douglas, J., in chambers), a decision on an application for a stay that noted it was within the province of the judiciary to ensure men and women in the military are treated equally under the law and in ways that "do not turn on the charity of a military commander." *Winters*, 89 S. Ct. at 59-60 (Douglas, J.,



in chambers). But the ultimate holding in *Winters* is based on facts that are distinguishable from this case. In *Winters*, the Court's rationale was to prevent men and women from being treated differently by different superiors within the military. *Id.* By contrast, Plaintiffs here challenge what they purport to be the practice of the *entire* military (*i.e.*, the alleged No Accommodation Policy). Additionally, *Winters* is distinguishable in that it involves a reservist attempting to *evade* active-duty call-up to Vietnam, *id.* at 57, whereas this case involves servicemembers' attempt to *remain and advance* in the military.

Specifically with respect to the RFRA claim, Plaintiffs also argue those claims are justiciable because the statute permits the assertion of a violation "as a claim or defense in a judicial proceeding and [to] obtain appropriate relief against the government," thereby making such claims justiciable. Mem. 18 (citing 42 U.S.C. § 2000bb-1 (c)). But while RFRA claims may be justiciable in certain military contexts, *see Singh v. McHugh*, 185 F. Supp. 3d 201, 218 (D.D.C.2016) (finding RFRA applies to the military), the *Mindes* test raises the justiciability bar considerably and for the foregoing reasons, weighs heavily against the likelihood of success of Plaintiffs' claims in this specific case.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> In specifically addressing 42 U.S.C. § 2000bb-1(b) in a similar case related to the military's COVID-19 vaccine Directive, Justice Kavanaugh specifically foreclosed the possibility that a RFRA claim would survive:

[E]ven accepting that RFRA applies in this particular military context, RFRA does not justify judicial intrusion into military affairs in this case. That is because the Navy has an extraordinarily compelling interest in maintaining strategic and operational control over the assignment and

Ultimately, given the threat that COVID-19 poses to, *inter alia*, military readiness and operations, the Court finds persuasive and analogous the line of cases affording significant leeway to military leaders for these types of military judgments. Accordingly, *Winter v. NRDC* and its progenitors, along with Justice Kavanaugh's recent concurrence in a similar case, counsel that Plaintiffs' claims, with the possible exception of Count III, are non-justiciable military judgments, even before confronting the *Mindes* test. However, notwithstanding the Court's finding that apart from potentially Count III, Plaintiffs have, at a minimum, failed at the outset to clearly show that all their claims are justiciable, the Court will further consider justiciability issues by next applying the second *Mindes* threshold requirement of exhaustion.

### **B. Exhaustion of Administrative Remedies**

Separately, to succeed on their claims, Plaintiffs must exhaust their available remedies within the armed forces. *See Parisi v. Davidson*, 405 U.S. 34, 37 (1972) (describing the exhaustion doctrine as allowing "an administrative agency to perform functions within its special competence ... to moot judicial controversies"); *Williams v. Wilson*, 762 F.2d 357, 359-60 (4th Cir. 1985) (holding that under *Alindes*, courts "should not review internal military affairs" absent "exhaustion of available intraservice corrective

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deployment of all Special Warfare personnel-including control over decisions about military readiness. And no less restrictive means would satisfy that interest in this context.

*U.S. Navy Seals 1-26*, 142 S. Ct. at I 302 (Kavanaugh, J., concurring). Plaintiffs do point to the *minority* of related military vaccine cases that found similar claims justiciable, which the Court finds unpersuasive.

measures"). That Plaintiffs allege constitutional and statutory claims against the military do not obviate Plaintiffs' obligation to exhaust the military's intraservice corrective measures prior to filing suit. *See Mindes*, 453 F.2d at 201.

Defendants argue that (1) no Plaintiff has yet faced separation proceedings, and (2) even if they do and receive a final separation order, they can pursue corrections to their military record and/or reinstatement through existing processes. Opp. 16. Plaintiffs argue that such relief is futile because it could be overridden by the Service Secretaries and would not declare Defendants' actions as unlawful and therefore available avenues of relief are imperfect remedies that need not be exhausted. Mem. 21. However, Plaintiffs only assume, but have not demonstrated, futility. Moreover, that Plaintiffs seek relief that may extend outside of the scope of the administrative review process does not vitiate the exhaustion requirement. *See Guerra v. Scruggs*, 942 F. 2d 270, 277 (4th Cir. 1991) ("[T]he inability of the [correction] board to give the plaintiff all the relief he seeks does not automatically excuse the failure to exhaust."). Defendants represent, including through declarations of non-Defendant military leaders, that Plaintiffs' unexhausted administrative remedies are not futile formalities and would be determined on an individualized basis. Opp. 18.

Plaintiffs contend they have exhausted military remedies because they have each submitted an RAR. Reply 9. But it is undisputed that some Plaintiffs are still awaiting an initial decision on their RARs while others await their appeals. The Court rejects the notion that a mere pre-decision submission of an RAR, or even an RAR appeal submission can constitute

exhaustion, even if the RAR approval rate is low. And Plaintiffs' position runs contrary to the definition of "exhaustion," which means the "pursuit of options until none remain." Exhaustion, Black's Law Dictionary (11th ed. 2019). Further, not only are there outstanding intraservice remedies available to all Plaintiffs, but no Plaintiff has actually gone through separation proceedings, a fact which further forecloses a finding of exhaustion. And it is those final separation proceedings that are of particular consequence. Absent a separation proceeding and final decision, the Court cannot find that Plaintiffs have exhausted their intraservice remedies. And while district courts have admittedly reached different conclusions with respect to the exhaustion requirement as applied in similar cases, the Court finds persuasive the reasonings of those courts that have found servicemembers to have failed the exhaustion requirement. *See, e.g., Short*, 2022 WL 1051852, at \*4 (finding plaintiff's claims to be non-justiciable, in part because the plaintiff, whose appeal was denied but had not yet undergone separation proceedings, had "not yet exhausted administrative remedies" and that such remedies could not be categorized as futile).

The Court also finds unavailing Plaintiffs' argument that the futility exception to the exhaustion doctrine applies because (1) some RARs have been granted, and (2) no Plaintiff has fully exhausted available remedies, including by pleading their case in an administrative discharge proceeding; thus, it is premature to say that such remedies are futile.<sup>15</sup> *See*

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<sup>15</sup> The Court has reviewed and considered all of the evidence, including the supplemental evidence that Plaintiffs submitted

*id* (rejecting a servicemember's futility argument because the approval rate was "not zero" and the plaintiff's evidence focused on the results of the RAR and RAR appeal process, *not* the results of separation proceedings, which would be the decisive inquiry to determine futility).<sup>16</sup>

Plaintiffs also argue that RFRA has no exhaustion requirement. Reply 9. But the cases to which Plaintiffs cite are either (a) those minority of federal courts that have granted preliminary injunctions in the military vaccine context; or (b) distinguishable as Plaintiffs' cited case, *Stuart Circle Parish v. Bd. of Zoning Appeals*, 946 F. Supp. 1225, 1234 (E.D. Va. 1996), was a civilian case about whether a church was required under RFRA to seek an accommodation prior to challenging a binding local law. Overall, Plaintiffs fail to address those military vaccine cases that find servicemembers' claims (including under RFRA) to be

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and the related briefing by the Parties. The Court affords little to no weight to the purported Info Memo from the Acting Inspector General. Not only does the short, two-page document fail to identify with sufficient specificity its evaluation methods, criteria, and sample size, but it is both preliminary in nature (*i.e.*, it only discusses "potential noncompliance") and contradicts the more concrete evidence that Defendants have presented. *See, e.g.*, declarations identified *infra* n. 17-21. Nevertheless, the Court is permitted to evaluate the justiciability of a claim based on the evidence before it, even in the early stages of litigation; *see Lovern v. Edwards*, 190 F.3d 648, 654 (4th Cir. 1999) ("[T]he absence of jurisdiction may be raised at any time during the case, and may be based on the court's review of the evidence."); and the Court has considered it. *See also Arbaugh v. Y&H Corp.*, 546 U.S. 500, 514 (2006) ("[I]n some instances, if subject-matter jurisdiction turns on contested facts, the trial judge may be authorized to review the evidence and resolve the dispute on her own.").

<sup>16</sup> Other courts to address the futility argument are split.

non-justiciable, in part on exhaustion grounds. *See, e.g., Church*, 573 F. Supp. 3d at 137-38; *Short*, 2022 WL 1051852, at \*3-4. In any event, even assuming *arguendo* that no *statutory* exhaustion requirement is *per se* imposed on the RFRA claim, the *jurisprudential* exhaustion requirement imposed under *Alindes*, as adopted by the Fourth Circuit, still controls. *CJ Williams*, 762 F.2d at 360 (noting "the second *Mindes* threshold requirement of exhaustion of available intraservice remedies").

Based on the First Amendment, Plaintiffs also argue that under *Cooksey v. Futrell*, 721 F.3d 226 (4th Cir. 2013), exhaustion is not required when the government has "manifested its views" that a policy has been violated. Reply 9. But that is simply not the case here. Indeed, the policy at play in this case is that failure to vaccinate violates the Directive *unless* a servicemember has an approved exemption. Defendants have demonstrated through working files and declarations from non-Defendant leaders in the

Anny,<sup>17</sup> Navy,<sup>18</sup> Marines,<sup>19</sup> Coast Guard,<sup>20</sup> and Air Force<sup>21</sup> that no wholesale denial policy exists and that individualized considerations are given to each RAR and appeal. On the evidence before the Court, it cannot be said that a top-down, universal policy exists that holds all servicemembers who seek RARs are in violation of the Directive on the sole basis that they seek a religious exemption. Indeed, Plaintiffs are specifically *not* in violation while pursuing an exemption. [Doc. No. 82] at 35:10-11. In other words, Plaintiffs are not in violation of the policy during the

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<sup>17</sup> Declarations from U.S. Anny Colonel Kevin J. Mahoney, Chief, G3 Operations Division, Office of the Anny Surgeon General and U.S. Anny Medical Command, Opp. Ex. 3; [Doc. No. 80] Ex. E; and U.S. Anny Assistant Deputy for Military and Personnel Policy Frances Rivera, [Doc. No. 80] Ex. F.

<sup>18</sup> Declarations from U.S. Navy Vice Admiral William Merz, Deputy Chief of Naval Operations, Operations, Plans and Strategy, Opp. Ex. 4; U.S. Navy Admiral Michael M. Gilday, the highest-ranking uniformed officer in the Navy who serves as Chief of Naval Operations, [Doc. No. 80] at 2; *id.* at Ex. A; and U.S. Navy Captain Mery-Angela Sanabria Katson, Branch Head, Enlisted Plans and Policy, *id.* at Ex. D.

<sup>19</sup> Declarations from U.S. Marine Corps Lieutenant General David J. Furness, Deputy Commandant for Plans, Policies, and Operations, Opp. Ex. 6; U.S. Marine Corps General Eric M. Smith, the second-highest ranking uniformed officer in the Marine Corps who serves as the Assistant Commandant, [Doc. No. 80] at 2; *id.* at Ex. B; U.S. Marine Corps Colonel Adam L. Jeppe, Branch Head, Manpower Military Policy Branch of Manpower and Reserve Affairs, *id.* at Ex. G.

<sup>20</sup> Declaration from U.S. Coast Guard Rear Admiral Eric Jones, Deputy for Personnel Readiness, Opp. Ex. 8.

<sup>21</sup> Declarations from U.S. Air Force Major Matthew J. Streett, Staff Chaplain at the Office of the Chief of Chaplains, Opp. Ex. 12; and U.S. Air Force Major General John J. DeGoes, Deputy Surgeon General, [Doc. No. 80] Ex. C.

pendency of their RAR and/or RAR appeal, and if an RAR is granted (either in the first instance or after pursuing the intraservice appeal/remedy process) then there would be no violation for failing to vaccinate. This makes *Cooksey* inapposite.<sup>22</sup>

Ultimately, Plaintiffs' failure to clearly show that they exhausted their intraservice remedies alone precludes the Court from granting a preliminary injunction. However, for the sake of completeness and given the split among those courts that have evaluated the validity of Plaintiffs' futility argument, the Court will apply the *Mindes* test.

### **C. *Mindes* Test**

In *Williams v. Wilson*, the Fourth Circuit adopted the test set forth in *Mindes v. Seaman* for determining the reviewability by federal courts of actions by military authorities. *See Williams*, 762 F.2d at 360; *see also Roe v. Dep't of Def.*, 947 F.3d 207, 217-18 (4th Cir. 2010) (noting the *Mindes* test continues to be binding in the Fourth Circuit). The *Mindes* test requires district courts to weigh four considerations "in light of the general policy of nonreview of military matters." *Williams*, 762 F.2d at 359. The four factors are:

- (1) the nature and strength of the plaintiffs challenge to the military determination;
- (2) the potential injury to the plaintiff if review is

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<sup>22</sup> Moreover, the cases that Plaintiffs cite in footnote 11 of their Reply are distinguishable as they fail to address the exhaustion doctrine as applied in *Mindes* and relate, respectively in the order they are cited, to a facial challenge to land use regulations, exhaustion under North Carolina law as it applies to civilian challenges on constitutional grounds to state statutes, and exhaustion of state administrative remedies in § 1983 actions.



refused; (3) the type and degree of anticipated interference with the military function; (4) the extent to which the exercise of military expertise or discretion is involved.

*Id.*

The parties agree that the *Mindes* test applies, but differ in their views concerning its application. First, as to the nature and strength of their challenge, Plaintiffs cite six cases where preliminary injunctions were granted in military vaccine cases to argue the strength of their case.<sup>23</sup> Mem. 7 & n.8. Second, as to injury, Plaintiffs claim a presumption that they will be irreparably harmed, and further state that loss of careers and career-related responsibilities, benefits, outside employment opportunities, and family disruptions constitute a serious injury. Mem. 22. Defendants counter that because Plaintiffs have not yet been formally disciplined or separated, any injuries are "wholly speculative." Opp. 20. Third, Plaintiffs claim neither (a) requiring DoD to follow existing policies nor (b) Plaintiffs' refusal to vaccinate, particularly given that other servicemembers remain unvaccinated due to medical exemptions, interferes with military functions. Mem. 23. Fourth, Plaintiffs contend adjudication of constitutional issues do not require military expertise, and that review of the military's alleged failure to follow its own policies is not discretionary. Mem. 23. Defendants lump the third and fourth *Mindes* factors together, arguing that judicial resolution would improperly "scrutinize military determinations regarding the health and safety of service members and overall force

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<sup>23</sup> Notably, Plaintiffs fail to address the majority of cases that have held otherwise. *See* Opp. 8-9 (collecting cases).

readiness." Opp. 20.

On balance, each of the four *Mindes* factors weigh against judicial intervention. First, upon careful review of each of Plaintiffs' causes of action, the briefing in support thereof and in opposition thereto, and a review similar cases, the Court finds Plaintiffs' claims are not strong and are unlikely to succeed. Second, Plaintiffs' injuries are either not yet realized or redressable. Third, and most importantly, Defendants assert, and the Court places great weight in their expert military judgment, that injunctive relief would significantly interfere with military operations as it pertains to troop health and combat readiness. *See U.S. Navy Seals 1-26*, 142 S. Ct. at 1302 (Kavanaugh, J., concurring) (finding no basis in a military vaccine case "for employing the judicial power in a manner that military commanders believe would impair the military"). Fourth, significant military expertise and discretion was necessary in crafting DoD's response to the pandemic given the unique training, mobilization, and health needs and dynamics associated with America's Armed Forces. *Id* (citing a Navy Admiral's declaration). Therefore, the *Mindes* factors counsel against justiciability.

For the aforementioned reasons, Plaintiffs' Motion for a Preliminary Injunctions is **DENIED** because Plaintiffs have failed to make a "clear showing" that their claims are likely justiciable; therefore, the claims cannot be likely to succeed. In light of this finding, the Court need not consider the likelihood of success on the merits of each particular cause of action, except to the extent it already has in evaluating the RFRA claim, *supra* n.15, and the strength of Plaintiffs' claims overall under the first *Mindes* factor. *Cf Flast v. Cohen*, 392 U.S. 83, 96

(1942) ("federal courts will not give advisory opinions") (quoting C. Wright, *Federal Courts* 34 (1963)).

#### IV. *Sua Sponte* Dismissal

More than 200 years ago, Chief Justice John Marshall laid the groundwork for the justiciability doctrine, proclaiming that "[q]uestions ... which are, by the constitution and laws, submitted to the executive, can never be made in this court." *Marbury v. Madison*, 5 U.S. 137, 170 (1803). One hundred and fifty years later, the Supreme Court applied this principle to hold that "judges are not given the task of running the Army," and that military decision-making "rests upon the Congress and upon the President of the United States and his subordinates." *Orio.ff*, 345 U.S. at 93-94. Congress has not enacted legislation related to a COVID-19 vaccination requirement in the military.<sup>24</sup> However, the President, through his subordinates, has acted and implemented the Directive.

Accordingly, and for the reasons articulated in Section III, *supra*, not only are Plaintiffs' claims unlikely to succeed for want of justiciability, they are, in fact, non-justiciable. The Court therefore lacks subject-matter jurisdiction and this action must be dismissed. *Cf. Hamilton v. Pa/Iozzi*, 848 F.3d 614, 619 (4th Cir. 2017) ("Justiciability is an issue of subject-matter jurisdiction, and we have an independent obligation to evaluate our ability to hear a case before reaching the merits."). The Court

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<sup>24</sup> Indeed, despite such legislation being introduced more than a year ago and *before* the Directive was announced, Congress has taken no action to advance the bill. *See* H.R. 3860, I 17th Cong. (2021).

makes this finding after Plaintiffs had ample opportunity to (and did) address justiciability, including (1) having fully briefed this issue in their memorandum accompanying their Motion, *see* Mem. 18-24; (2) having responded to Defendants' arguments in writing, *see* Reply 5-11; and (3) having had the opportunity to argue justiciability at the September 28 hearing, *see* [Doc. No. 82] at 4:7-9 (Plaintiffs' counsel noting "[m]y cocounsel will be handling justiciability, the *Mindes* application"). *See Robertson v. Anderson Mill Elementary Sch.*, 989 F.3d 282, 291 (4th Cir. 2021) (stating district courts may "exercise their authority to *sua sponte* dismiss inadequate complaints if the procedure employed is fair to the parties" and plaintiffs are "afforded notice and an opportunity to amend the complaint or otherwise respond") (citations and quotations omitted).<sup>25</sup>

In light of the Court's finding of non-justiciability, Federal Rule of Civil Procedure 12(h)(3) demands that "(i)f the court determines at any time that it lacks subject-matter jurisdiction, the court must dismiss the action." In this Circuit, "a federal court is obligated to dismiss a case

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<sup>25</sup> The Court recognizes that *in* some circumstances an evidentiary hearing must be held prior to dismissing a case for want of jurisdiction. *See Lovern*, 190 F.3d at 654. However, here, the Court lacks subject-matter jurisdiction because Plaintiffs' claims are non-justiciable based on the undisputed fact that, *inter a/ia*, Plaintiffs are servicemembers suing executive branch officials over a military policy based on the military's professional judgment. In other words, unlike in *Lovern*, jurisdictional facts are *not* "intertwined with the merits of the dispute[.]" *Id.* at 654, and dismissal at this stage promotes the efficiency the Fourth Circuit endorsed in *Lovern* when it disposed of the case early in the litigation. *Id.*

whenever it appears the court lacks subject matter jurisdiction." *Lovern v. Edwards*, 190 F.3d 648, 654 (4th Cir. 1999); *see also Arbaugh v. Y&H Corp.*, 546 U.S. 500, 514 (2006) ("[C]ourts ... have an independent obligation to determine whether subject-matter jurisdiction exists, even in the absence of a challenge from any party [W]hen a federal court concludes that it lacks subject-matter jurisdiction, the court must dismiss the complaint in its entirety."); *Brickwood Contractors, Inc. v. Datanet Eng'g*, 369 F.3d 385, 390 (4th Cir. 2004) ("[Q]uestions of subject matter jurisdiction may be raised at any point during the proceedings and may (or, more precisely, must) be raised *sua sponte* by the court."); *Thompson v. Gillen*, 491 F. Supp. 24, 26 (E.D. Va. 1980) (remanding a case and noting that though no motion was filed, "courts of limited jurisdiction, such as this Court, have the duty, *sua sponte*, to determine in each case their jurisdiction to proceed").

The Court having found that Plaintiffs' claims are non-justiciable, and Plaintiffs having received notice of the justiciability issue through a fair procedure and then addressing it on three separate occasions, the Complaint is **DISMISSED** *sua sponte*.

## V. CONCLUSION

For these reasons, it is hereby

**ORDERED** Plaintiffs' Motion for Preliminary Injunction [Doc. No. 59] be, and the same hereby is **DENIED** and it is further

**ORDERED** that the above-captioned matter be, and the same hereby is **DISMISSED** for lack of subject-matter jurisdiction; and it is further

**ORDERED** that Plaintiffs' Motion for Class Certification [Doc. No. 71] be and the same hereby

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is, **DENIED** as moot.

The Clerk is directed to enter judgment in favor of Defendants pursuant to Federal Rule of Civil Procedure 58 and forward copies of this Order to all counsel of record.

Alexandria Virginia  
November 23, 2022

/s/ Anthony J. Trenga  
Anthony J. Trenga  
Senior U.S. District Judge

**IN THE UNITED STATES DISTRICT COURT  
FOR THE EASTERN DISTRICT OF VIRGINIA  
Alexandria Division**

ISRAEL ALVARADO, <i>et al.</i> ,	)	
	)	
	)	
v.	)	
LLOYD AUSTIN, III, <i>et al.</i> ,	)	Case No.: I :22-cv-876
	)	(AJT/JF A)
	)	
<i>Defendants.</i>	)	

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**MEMORANDUM OPINION AND ORDER**

Plaintiffs have filed a Motion for Reconsideration (the “Motion”), [Doc. No. 88], with respect to the Court’s dismissal of this action on November 23, 2022. For the following reasons, the Motion is DENIED.

**I. BACKGROUND**

This action stems from a Complaint by military chaplains surrounding the military’s COVID-19 Vaccine Mandate (the “Mandate”). The Court has previously summarized the Mandate and relevant issues, *see* [Doc. No. 86] at 2-6, and in response to Plaintiffs’ Motion for a Preliminary Injunction, [Doc. No. 59], issued an Order on November 23, 2022, denying that motion and *sua sponte* dismissing the case for want of subject-matter jurisdiction, [Doc. No. 86] (the “Order”).

After the Court’s Order, the James M. Inhofe National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2023 (“2023 NDAA”) was enacted. [Doc. No. 90-1] at 1, 6.<sup>1</sup> Contained within the 2023 NDAA was an

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<sup>1</sup> Exhibit 1 to [Doc. No. 90] is a corrected memorandum submitted by Plaintiffs to correct factual and other errors

express provision, Section 525, requiring the Department of Defense to rescind the Mandate. [Doc. No. 94] at 5. On January 10, 2023, Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin issued a memorandum rescinding the Mandate (the “Rescission Memo”), ordering that the military update records to remove adverse actions based on prior refusals to vaccinate, and outlining recourse for any servicemembers administratively discharged. [Doc. No. 94-1]. The Secretary also directed that further guidance be issued to ensure uniform implementation of the Rescission Memo. *Id.*

On December 17, 2022, Plaintiffs filed the Motion under Federal Rule of Civil Procedure 59(e), seeking reconsideration of the Court’s Order on the grounds that (1) the 2023 NDAA amounted to a change in controlling law; (2) the Court made clear errors of law in dismissing this action; and (3) new evidence emerged and is now available to the Court.<sup>2</sup> [Doc. No. 90-1] at 1.

## II. LEGAL STANDARD

Federal Rule of Civil Procedure 59(e) permits a party to file a motion to alter or amend a judgment within 28 days after judgment is entered. The Fourth Circuit provides three grounds for reconsideration: “(1) to accommodate an intervening change in controlling law; (2) to account for new evidence not

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contained in the original memorandum in support of their Motion to Reconsider filed with the Court, [Doc. No. 89].

<sup>2</sup> As discussed, *infra* Sec. III(C), the “new evidence” that Plaintiffs rely on is a statement that Government counsel made in a hearing before the Sixth Circuit, which Plaintiffs did not discover until after the Motion for Preliminary Injunction in this action was adjudicated. [Doc. No. 90-1] at 26-27.



available at trial; or (3) to correct a clear error of law or prevent manifest injustice.” *Hutchinson v. Staton*, 994 F.2d 1076, 1081 (4th Cir. 1993). However, “reconsideration of a judgment after its entry is an extraordinary remedy which should be used sparingly,” *Pacific Ins. Co. v. Am. Nat. Fire Ins. Co.*, 148 F.3d 396, 403 (4th Cir. 1998) (quotation and citation omitted), and is “not intended to allow for reargument of the very issues that the court has previously decided,” *DeLong v. Thompson*, 790 F. Supp. 594, 618 (E.D. Va. 1991).

### III. ANALYSIS

For the reasons stated below, reconsideration is not warranted in this case because (a) the 2023 NDAA is not a change in law that affects the basis for the Court’s Order and the 2023 NDAA would have resulted in the same *sua sponte* dismissal of this action, had it been in effect when the Court ruled on the preliminary injunction motion; (b) even if the purported “new evidence” was new, it is not material, and (c) there are neither clear errors of law that need to be corrected nor manifest injustice to be prevented.

#### A. Enactment of 2023 NDAA

Plaintiffs argue the 2023 NDAA “eliminates entirely the legal basis” for the Mandate and “conclusively demonstrates that Secretary Austin sought and did usurp major policy decisions properly made by Congress.” [Doc. No. 90-1] at 7-6 (internal citation and quotation omitted). But Plaintiffs mischaracterize Section 525, which provides:

Not later than 30 days after the date of the enactment of this Act, the Secretary of Defense shall rescind the mandate that members of the Armed Forces be vaccinated

against COVID-19 pursuant to the memorandum dated August 24, 2021, regarding “Mandatory Coronavirus Disease 2019 Vaccination of Department of Defense Service Members.”

[Doc. No. 94] at 5. The 2023 NDAA does not address the legality of the Mandate or otherwise speak to whether Defendants acted outside of their authority by issuing and implementing the Mandate prior to the enactment of Section 525. Rather, Congress simply exercised its authority to make a post-Mandate policy decision with respect to the military. That Congress acted in such a fashion does not in and of itself suggest the Mandate was unlawful or that the Court erred in its legal analysis based on the then-existing facts and law.

Plaintiffs further contend that Section 525 “eliminates” a central premise to the Court’s *sua sponte* dismissal.<sup>3</sup> [Doc. No. 90-1] at 7. But again, the enactment of the 2023 NDAA did not establish or in any way suggest that the Court erred in concluding that decisions such as whether to require that troops be vaccinated rest outside Article III. If anything, the 2023 NDAA endorses the Court’s reasoning as it shows that even absent judicial review, the Mandate

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<sup>3</sup> In that regard, the Court’s Order (a) stated that “military decision-making ‘rests upon the Congress and upon the President of the United States and his subordinates,’” [Doc. No. 86] at 17 (citing *Orloff v. Willoughby*, 345 U.S. 83, 93-94 (1953)); (b) noted that Congress had not acted as of the date of the Order, *id.*; and (c) found that, for that reason and others, the military’s professional judgment as to the Mandate was non-justiciable, *id.* at 17-18.

was at all times subject to civilian review through the political branches.<sup>4</sup>

The 2023 NDAA and the Rescission Memo also confirm that Plaintiffs have still failed to exhaust their intraservice remedies and their claims are non-justiciable because, *inter alia*, they are not ripe claims. No Plaintiff can now be separated on account of their vaccination status. And to the extent any Plaintiff complains of any other alleged harm stemming from their refusal to vaccinate – *e.g.*, exclusion from certain assignments/training, letters of reprimand, etc. – they have not exhausted their intraservice remedies as to those claims. Additional guidance is forthcoming related to the Rescission Memo, [Doc. No. 94-1], and any harm that Plaintiffs claim to have already suffered may be redressed by that guidance and the Rescission Memo’s implementation. Thus, any future or ongoing harm that Plaintiffs allege is entirely speculative, and prospective remedies based on alleged past harm is not yet exhausted in light of new and forthcoming policies.

In sum, the Court did not commit clear error by imposing an exhaustion requirement on Plaintiffs’ claims, *see* discussion *infra* Sec. III(B), and even if the Court were to now find that Plaintiffs had previously exhausted their intraservice remedies by seeking religious accommodation requests,<sup>5</sup> such requests and any relief therefrom are now stale given

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<sup>4</sup> Because the 2023 NDAA was signed by President Biden, it was both Article I and Article II actors that ultimately reviewed and rescinded the Mandate.

<sup>5</sup> To the contrary, the Court explicitly found that Plaintiffs had not exhausted their intraservice remedies. [Doc. No. 86] at 10-14.

the Rescission Memo. While the 2023 NDAA is a change in law, that change may, and likely will, allow Plaintiffs to obtain review of and relief from Plaintiffs' complained-of injuries through forthcoming, post-Rescission Memo intraservice remedies and policies, thereby potentially eliminating any need for litigation. Accordingly, the 2023 NDAA further confirms that Plaintiffs cannot show that they have exhausted their intraservice remedies and that this litigation is premature.

The ongoing implementation of the Rescission Memo also confirms that the Court lacks subject-matter jurisdiction based on lack of ripeness as to any claim for injuries. In that regard, a claim is not ripe for adjudication if it is not fit for judicial intervention. *In re Naranjo*, 768 F.3d 332, 347 (4th Cir. 2014) (citation omitted). "A case is fit for adjudication when the action in controversy is final and not dependent on future uncertainties; conversely, a claim is not ripe when it rests upon contingent future events that may not occur as anticipated." *Id.* (quoting in part *Scoggins v. Lee's Crossing Homeowner's Ass'n*, 718 F.3d 262, 270 (4th Cir. 2013)) (internal quotations omitted). Here, the case is not fit for judicial intervention. How and if the military will redress and/or accommodate Plaintiffs in the aftermath of Section 525 and the Rescission Memo is entirely speculative and uncertain. *See Beard v. Stahr*, 370 U.S. 41, 41-42 (1962) (finding a servicemember's suit to enjoin his removal from the active duty list was premature because he had not been removed and, if he were, "adequate procedures for seeking redress will be open to him"); *Roberts v. Roth*, 594 F. Supp. 3d 29, 35-36 (D.D.C. 2022) (holding in a military vaccine case that plaintiff's claims were not ripe because the

intraservice corrective process was not complete and finding the action “premature” because the plaintiff was not yet discharged). For these reasons, the case is not ripe for adjudication and must be dismissed for want of subject-matter jurisdiction.

### **B. Plaintiffs’ Assertions of Clear Errors of Law**

Plaintiffs first argue that the Court clearly erred when it added an exhaustion requirement to the Religious Freedom Restoration Act (“RFRA”) in derogation of its steadfast duty to resolve cases within its jurisdiction. [Doc. No. 90-1] at 9. Plaintiffs claim the Court contradicted itself and had already recognized that RFRA does not require exhaustion when it noted that Plaintiffs’ claims are non-justiciable military judgments “with the possible exception of [RFRA]”. [Doc. No. 90-1] at 10 n.5 (citing [Doc. No. 86] at 10). To the contrary, the Court simply noted in that regard that the RFRA claim was arguably not foreclosed at the outset as a non-justiciable military judgment. *See* [Doc. No. 86] at 10 (stating that “even before confronting the *Mindes* [*v. Seaman*, 543 F.2d 197 (5th Cir. 1971)] test,” Plaintiffs’ claims are non-justiciable military judgments “with the possible exception of [RFRA]”). The Court went on to rule, however, that the RFRA claim was, in fact, non-justiciable once the Court concluded, as it did, that the *Mindes* test and accompanying exhaustion prerequisite applies to RFRA. *See* [Doc. No. 86] at 10. The Court then distinguished the few cases Plaintiffs cited for the contrary proposition.<sup>6</sup> [Doc. No. 86] at 13;

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<sup>6</sup> Plaintiffs principally cite *Patsy v. Bd. Of Regents of Fla.*, 457 U.S. 496, 509-12 (1982) for the notion that judicially imposed military exhaustion requirements are inappropriate where a

*cf. id.* at 11-12 (citing *Williams v. Wilson*, 762 F.2d 357, 359-60 (4th Cir. 1985) (holding that under *Mindes*, courts “should not review internal military affairs” absent “exhaustion of available intraservice corrective measures”)). Because the Court found that Plaintiffs’ RFRA claims were not exhausted, the *Mindes* exhaustion requirement, imposed by the Fourth Circuit in *Williams*, was not satisfied; judicial review of Plaintiffs’ claims was, therefore, improper; and the Court was required to dismiss the case for want of jurisdiction.

Plaintiffs similarly challenge the Court’s dismissal of their other non-RFRA claims, again arguing that either no exhaustion requirement exists or the requirement was satisfied.<sup>7</sup> But following the

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statute already contains an exhaustion requirement. [Doc. No. 90-1] at 10-11. But RFRA has no statutory exhaustion requirement; moreover, *Patsy* was about race and sex discrimination in the civilian (not military) context and decided more than a decade *before* RFRA was enacted.

<sup>7</sup> In particular, Plaintiffs argue the Administrative Procedures Act (“APA”) contains no exhaustion requirement, citing *Darby v. Cisneros*, 509 U.S. 137, 145 (1993) for the proposition that the APA is only subject to exhaustion requirements imposed by statute or agency rule. [Doc. No. 90-1] at 24. But *Darby* involved a suit against the Secretary of Housing and Urban Development – a civilian agency. Whether *Darby* applies in the military context is questionable, particularly given the extraordinary deference that the Supreme Court has repeatedly afforded the military. *See* [Doc. No. 86] at 7 (citing Supreme Court authority); *cf. Bowman v. Brownlee*, 333 F. Supp. 2d 554, 558 (W.D. Va. 2004) (“[S]ince *Darby* involved the interpretation of the APA in the context of an administrative ruling by the Department of Housing and Urban Development, courts across the country have reached different conclusions as to whether *Darby* extends to cases involving military decisions.”); Cpt. E. Roy Hawkens, *The Exhaustion Component of the Mindes*

Rescission Memo, as detailed above, no claim can now be deemed exhausted. And as to the existence of an exhaustion requirement, Plaintiffs fail to recognize and reconcile the difference between a *statutory* and a *judicial* exhaustion requirement. In that regard, it is undisputed that certain of Plaintiffs' claims do not have a statutory exhaustion requirement. But that a particular claim may lack a statutory exhaustion requirement does not preclude courts from imposing one. See *McCarthy v. Madigan*, 503 U.S. 140, 144 (1992) (“[W]here Congress has not clearly required exhaustion, sound judicial discretion governs.”). Thus, all of Plaintiffs' claims have a threshold judicial exhaustion requirement imposed by *Williams/Mindes*. And that judicially created exhaustion requirement simply speaks to whether the Court has jurisdiction to hear a particular case *at that time*. Cf. *Nat'l Treasury Emps. Union v. King*, 961 F.2d 240, 243 (D.C. Cir. 1992) (“The doctrine of

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*Justiciability Test Is Not Laid to Rest* by Darby v. Cisneros, 166 Mil. L. Rev. 67, 68 (2000) (“Exhaustion of intramilitary remedies should [] continue to be the rule for APA claims brought by service members.”). And the Fourth Circuit has specifically declined to answer this question. *Wilt v. Gilmore*, 72 Fed. App'x 484, 488 (4th Cir. 2003) (“We conclude that we need not address *Darby's* impact (if any) on our rule requiring exhaustion of military remedies.”). Moreover, it is unclear whether *Darby's* holding with respect to exhaustion requirements for “agency action” would even apply in this case. The APA's definition of “agency” specifically excludes “military authority exercised in the field in time of war or in occupied territory.” 5 U.S.C. § 701(b)(1)(G). The Mandate was clearly an exercise of military authority that governed, in part, servicemembers stationed, assigned, or subject to future assignment in occupied territory. Therefore, even if *Darby* applied to military cases, it may be wholly inapplicable regardless on the grounds that the type of “agency action” contemplated does not encompass the Mandate.

exhaustion of administrative remedies concerns the *timing* rather than the jurisdictional authority of federal court decisionmaking.”) (emphasis in original). In other words, the Court’s finding with respect to Plaintiffs’ failure to exhaust was a determination on the timing of their claims rather than the substance, notwithstanding the general deference that Courts afford to the military in these types of matters, and thus Plaintiffs’ cited authority about courts’ inherent duty to hear cases within their jurisdiction misses the mark. Because Plaintiffs failed to exhaust their claims, the Court did not commit clear error by finding they were non-justiciable *at that time*.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> The Court also rejects the claim that, even if an irreparable injury exception to exhaustion applies in this Circuit, one exists here. Plaintiffs’ injuries are either not yet realized or redressable. Plaintiffs’ principle case for such an assertion, *Elrod v. Burns*, 427 U.S. 347 (1976), is distinguishable as a civilian case related solely to a First Amendment case based on political affiliation. And unlike another one of Plaintiffs’ cited cases, *U.S. ex rel. Brooks v. Clifford*, 412 F.2d 1137 (4th Cir. 1969), Plaintiffs here are no longer subject to the objected-to requirement (notably, even when the Mandate was in effect, there were no forcible vaccinations). *Brooks* is further distinguishable because it was a habeas proceeding regarding a conscientious objector to military service generally. And any suggestion that allegations of constitutional violations do not require exhaustion does not square with the first *Mindes* prerequisite, which requires *both* a constitutional (or statutory or regulatory) violation *and* intraservice exhaustion. *Mindes*, 453 F.2d at 201. In other words, imposing the dual requirement of exhaustion and a constitutional violation would make no sense if a constitutional violation excused a failure to exhaust, as Plaintiffs contend. *Cf. Thetford Properties IV Ltd. P’ship v.*



Plaintiffs also contend that the Court improperly found that Plaintiffs had not pursued relief through the Board of Correction of Military Records (“BCMR”) prior to exhausting their claims.<sup>9</sup>

Similarly irrelevant is whether the Court committed clear error, as Plaintiffs contend, in the Court’s previous assessment of the *Mindes* doctrine’s four factors based on the facts of this case. *See* [Doc. No. 86] at 16. That assessment, summary in nature, was not central, or essential, to the Court’s decision, since the Court’s necessary inquiry with respect to justiciability needed to go no further than its determination that the Plaintiffs had failed to satisfy the *Mindes* prerequisite of exhaustion, thereby eliminating the need to consider the merits of the *Mindes* factors. Whatever the merits of the four *Mindes* factors, the Court’s Order was not anchored in them.

Lastly, Plaintiffs argue the Court erred by giving more weight to certain out-of-circuit decisions than others, and for relying on Justice Kavanaugh’s concurrence in a similar and recent military vaccine case.<sup>10</sup> [Doc. No. 90-1] at 24-26. The Court declines to

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*U.S. Dep’t of Hous. & Urb. Dev.*, 907 F.2d 445, 448 (4th Cir. 1990) (rejecting “as a generally rule [that] exhaustion is not necessary where administrative litigants raise constitutional challenges”).

<sup>9</sup> Notably, failure to pursue relief through BCMRs was not the sole grounds for the Court’s finding that Plaintiffs failed to exhaust intraservice remedies. *See* [Doc. No. 86] at 11-12 (noting, *inter alia*, that “no Plaintiff has actually gone through separation proceedings”).

<sup>10</sup> That case is *Austin v. U.S. Navy Seals 1-26*, 142 S. Ct. 1301 (2022) (Kavanaugh, J., concurring)

find clear error based on its assessment of the existing legal authority.

**C. New Evidence**

Plaintiffs assert that a statement by Government counsel in a hearing before the Sixth Circuit constitutes new evidence. [Doc. No. 90-1] at 26-27. That hearing occurred after the hearing in this case on Plaintiffs' Motion for Preliminary Injunction but prior to the Court's November 23, 2022 Order. It appears that Plaintiffs did not become aware of the statement until sometime after November 29, 2022, which is when the Sixth Circuit opinion was released. Given the statement occurred prior to the Court's Order, it arguably is not "new." But in any event, statements by counsel are not evidence. *See, e.g., Crawford v. Newport News Indus. Corp.*, No. 4:14-cr-130, 2018 WL 4524124, at \*6 (E.D. Va. Feb. 26, 2018) ("It should go without saying that statements of attorneys are not evidence, and that only admissible evidence can be considered by the Court in resolving [motions]."). More importantly, having reviewed the recording of oral argument in *Doster v. Kendall*, No. 22-3497 (6th Circ. 2022), the Court does not share Plaintiffs' construction of Government counsel's statements, and the statements would not have, in any event, altered the outcome of or analysis in the Court's prior Order in any respect.

**D. Manifest Injustice**

Plaintiffs argue that Defendants misrepresented the procedural rights and protections afforded to more junior chaplains, and that those chaplains instead

may be discharged without those protections.<sup>11</sup> [Doc. No 90-1] at 27-28. But even assuming *arguendo* that the Court materially relied on the alleged misrepresentation, Chaplain Hirko, who Plaintiffs point to, can no longer suffer the allegedly “irreparable harm” of discharge under the Rescission Memo. Accordingly, for the reasons stated earlier, any other allegations of past or future harm is speculative, unexhausted, not ripe for adjudication at this time, and cannot be said to have resulted in, or present the prospect of, manifest injustice.

#### IV. CONCLUSION

For the above reasons, it is hereby

**ORDERED** that Plaintiffs’ Motion for Reconsideration, [Doc. No. 88], be, and hereby is, **DENIED**.

The Clerk is directed to forward copies of this Order to all counsel of record.

Alexandria Virginia  
February 17, 2023

/s/ Anthony J. Trenga  
Anthony J. Trenga  
Senior U.S. District Judge

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<sup>11</sup> Defendants dispute any alleged mischaracterization. [Doc. No. 94] at 26-27.

**IN THE UNITED STATES DISTRICT COURT  
FOR THE EASTERN DISTRICT OF VIRGINIA  
Alexandria Division**

ISRAEL ALVARADO, <i>et al.</i> ,	)	
	<i>Plaintiffs,</i>	)
v.	)	Civil Action No.
LLOYD AUSTIN, III, <i>et al.</i> ,	)	1:22-cv-876
	<i>Defendants.</i>	)

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**AMENDED JUDGMENT**

Pursuant to the order of this Court entered on November 23, 2022, and in accordance with Federal Rule of Civil Procedure 58, JUDGMENT is hereby entered in favor of the Defendants, Llyod Austin, III, Frank Kendall, Carlos Del Toro, Christine Wormuth, Secretary Xavier Becerra, Janet Woodcock, Rochelle Walensky and against the Plaintiffs Israel Alvarado, Steven Barfield, Walter Brobst, Justin Brown, David Calger, Mark Cox, Jacob Eastman, Thomas Fussell, Nathanael Gentilhomme, Doyle Harris, Jeremiah Henderson, Andrew Hirko, Krista Ingram, Ryan Jackson, Joshua Layfield, James Lee, Brad Lewis, Robert Nelson, Rick Pak, Randy Pogue, Gerardo Rodriguez, Parker Schnetz, Richard Shaffer, Jonathan Shour, Jeremiah Snyder, David Troyer, Seth Weaver, Thomas Withers, Justin Wine, Matthew Wronski, Jerry Young, Brenton C. Asbury, Jordan Ballard, Chad Booth, Jeremiah Botello, Jordan Dersch, Clayton Diltz, Michael Hart, William Howarth, Jacob Lawrence, Lance Schrader, Jonathan Zagdanski.

42a

The Clerk is directed to forward copies of this  
Order to all counsel of record.

07/03/2023

Date

Alexandria VA

FERNANDO GALINDO,  
CLERK OF COURT

By: /s/

W. Garnett/Deputy Clerk



**U.S. CONST. art. VI, cl. 3**

The Senators and Representatives before mentioned, and the members of the several state legislatures, and all executive and judicial officers, both of the United States and of the several states, shall be bound by oath or affirmation, to support this Constitution; but no religious test shall ever be required as a qualification to any office or public trust under the United States.

**U.S. CONST. amend. I**

Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof; or abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press; or the right of the people peaceably to assemble, and to petition the Government for a redress of grievances.

**U.S. CONST. amend. V**

No person shall be held to answer for a capital, or otherwise infamous crime, unless on a presentment or indictment of a Grand Jury, except in cases arising in the land or naval forces, or in the Militia, when in actual service in time of War or public danger; nor shall any person be subject for the same offence to be twice put in jeopardy of life or limb; nor shall be compelled in any criminal case to be a witness against himself, nor be deprived of life, liberty, or property, without due process of law; nor shall private property be taken for public use, without just compensation.

**5 U.S.C. § 555(b)**

A person compelled to appear in person before an agency or representative thereof is entitled

to be accompanied, represented, and advised by counsel or, if permitted by the agency, by other qualified representative. A party is entitled to appear in person or by or with counsel or other duly qualified representative in an agency proceeding. So far as the orderly conduct of public business permits, an interested person may appear before an agency or its responsible employees for the presentation, adjustment, or determination of an issue, request, or controversy in a proceeding, whether interlocutory, summary, or otherwise, or in connection with an agency function. With due regard for the convenience and necessity of the parties or their representatives and within a reasonable time, each agency shall proceed to conclude a matter presented to it. This subsection does not grant or deny a person who is not a lawyer the right to appear for or represent others before an agency or in an agency proceeding.

**5 U.S.C. § 555(e)**

Prompt notice shall be given of the denial in whole or in part of a written application, petition, or other request of an interested person made in connection with any agency proceeding. Except in affirming a prior denial or when the denial is self-explanatory, the notice shall be accompanied by a brief statement of the grounds for denial.

**5 U.S.C. § 702**

A person suffering legal wrong because of agency action, or adversely affected or aggrieved by agency action within the



meaning of a relevant statute, is entitled to judicial review thereof. An action in a court of the United States seeking relief other than money damages and stating a claim that an agency or an officer or employee thereof acted or failed to act in an official capacity or under color of legal authority shall not be dismissed nor relief therein be denied on the ground that it is against the United States or that the United States is an indispensable party. The United States may be named as a defendant in any such action, and a judgment or decree may be entered against the United States: Provided, That any mandatory or injunctive decree shall specify the Federal officer or officers (by name or by title), and their successors in office, personally responsible for compliance. Nothing herein (1) affects other limitations on judicial review or the power or duty of the court to dismiss any action or deny relief on any other appropriate legal or equitable ground; or (2) confers authority to grant relief if any other statute that grants consent to suit expressly or impliedly forbids the relief which is sought.

**5 U.S.C. § 704**

Agency action made reviewable by statute and final agency action for which there is no other adequate remedy in a court are subject to judicial review. A preliminary, procedural, or intermediate agency action or ruling not directly reviewable is subject to review on the review of the final agency action. Except as otherwise expressly required by statute, agency action otherwise final is final for the

purposes of this section whether or not there has been presented or determined an application for a declaratory order, for any form of reconsideration, or, unless the agency otherwise requires by rule and provides that the action meanwhile is inoperative, for an appeal to superior agency authority.

**10 U.S.C. § 632**

(a) Except an officer of the Navy and Marine Corps who is an officer designated for limited duty (to whom section 8146(e) or 8372 of this title applies) and except as provided under section 637(a) of this title, each officer of the Army, Air Force, Marine Corps, or Space Force on the active-duty list who holds the grade of captain or major, and each officer of the Navy on the active-duty list who holds the grade of lieutenant or lieutenant commander, who has failed of selection for promotion to the next higher grade for the second time and whose name is not on a list of officers recommended for promotion to the next higher grade shall—

(1) except as provided in paragraph (3) and in subsection (c), be discharged on the date requested by him and approved by the Secretary concerned, which date shall be not later than the first day of the seventh calendar month beginning after the month in which the President approves the report of the board which considered him for the second time;

(2) if he is eligible for retirement under any provision of law, be retired under that law on the date requested by him and approved by

the Secretary concerned, which date shall be not later than the first day of the seventh calendar month beginning after the month in which the President approves the report of the board which considered him for the second time; or

(3) if on the date on which he is to be discharged under paragraph (1) he is within two years of qualifying for retirement under section 7311, 8323, or 9311 of this title, be retained on active duty until he is qualified for retirement and then retired under that section, unless he is sooner retired or discharged under another provision of law.

(b) The retirement or discharge of an officer pursuant to this section shall be considered to be an involuntary retirement or discharge for purposes of any other provision of law.

(c)

(1) If a health professions officer described in paragraph (3) is subject to discharge under subsection (a)(1) and, as of the date on which the officer is to be discharged under that subsection, the officer has not completed a period of active duty service obligation that the officer incurred under section 2005, 2114, 2123, or 2603 of this title, the officer shall be retained on active duty until completion of such active duty service obligation, and then be discharged under that subsection, unless sooner retired or discharged under another provision of law.

(2) The Secretary concerned may waive the applicability of paragraph (1) to any officer

if the Secretary determines that completion of the active duty service obligation of that officer is not in the best interest of the service.

(3) This subsection applies to a medical officer or dental officer or an officer appointed in a medical skill other than as a medical officer or dental officer (as defined in regulations prescribed by the Secretary of Defense).

#### **42 U.S.C. § 2000bb-1**

##### **(a) In general**

Government shall not substantially burden a person's exercise of religion even if the burden results from a rule of general applicability, except as provided in subsection (b).

##### **(b) Exception**

Government may substantially burden a person's exercise of religion only if it demonstrates that application of the burden to the person—

(1) is in furtherance of a compelling governmental interest; and

(2) is the least restrictive means of furthering that compelling governmental interest.

##### **(c) Judicial relief**

A person whose religious exercise has been burdened in violation of this section may assert that violation as a claim or defense in a judicial proceeding and obtain appropriate relief against a government. Standing to assert a claim or defense under this section shall be governed by the general rules of standing under article III of the Constitution.

**42 U.S.C. § 2000bb-3****(a) In general**

This chapter applies to all Federal law, and the implementation of that law, whether statutory or otherwise, and whether adopted before or after November 16, 1993.

**(b) Rule of construction**

Federal statutory law adopted after November 16, 1993, is subject to this chapter unless such law explicitly excludes such application by reference to this chapter.

**(c) Religious belief unaffected**

Nothing in this chapter shall be construed to authorize any government to burden any religious belief.

**National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2013, PUB. L. NO. 112-239, § 533(a)-(b), 126 Stat. 1632, 1727 (2013), as amended by National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2014, PUB. L. NO. 113-66, § 532(a), 127 Stat. 672, 759 (2013)**

**(a) Protection of Rights of Conscience.—**

(1) Accommodation.—Unless it could have an adverse impact on military readiness, unit cohesion, and good order and discipline, the Armed Forces shall accommodate individual expressions of belief of a member of the armed forces reflecting the sincerely held conscience, moral principles, or religious beliefs of the member and, in so far as practicable, may not use such expression of belief as the basis of any adverse personnel action, discrimination, or denial of promotion, schooling, training, or assignment.

(2) Disciplinary or administrative action.—Nothing in paragraph (1) precludes disciplinary or administrative action for conduct that is proscribed by chapter 47 of title 10, United States Code (the Uniform Code of Military Justice), including actions and speech that threaten good order and discipline.

(b) Protection of Chaplain Decisions Relating to Conscience, Moral Principles, or Religious Beliefs. —No member of the Armed Forces may—

(1) require a chaplain to perform any rite, ritual, or ceremony that is contrary to the conscience, moral principles, or religious beliefs of the chaplain; or

(2) discriminate or take any adverse personnel action against a chaplain, including denial of promotion, schooling, training, or assignment, on the basis of the refusal by the chaplain to comply with a requirement prohibited by paragraph (1).

**James M. Inhofe National Defense  
Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2023, PUB. L.  
No. 117-263, § 525, 136 Stat. 2395, 2571-72 (2022)**

Not later than 30 days after the date of the enactment of this Act, the Secretary of Defense shall rescind the mandate that members of the Armed Forces be vaccinated against COVID-19 pursuant to the memorandum dated August 24, 2021, regarding “Mandatory Coronavirus Disease 2019 Vaccination of Department of Defense Service Members”.

52a



SECRETARY OF DEFENSE  
1000 DEFENSE PENTAGON  
WASHINGTON, DC 20301-1000

[Jan. 10, 2023]

MEMORANDUM FOR SENIOR  
PENTAGON LEADERSHIP  
COMMANDERS OF THE  
COMBATANT COMMANDS  
DEFENSE AGENCY AND DOD  
FIELD ACTIVITY DIRECTORS

SUBJECT: Rescission of August 24, 2021 and  
November 30, 2021 Coronavirus  
Disease 2019 Vaccination  
Requirements for Members of the  
Armed Forces

I am deeply proud of the Department's work to combat the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19). Through your leadership, we have improved the health of our Service members and the readiness of the Force, and we have provided life-saving assistance to the American people and surged support to local health care systems and agencies at all levels of government. The Department has helped ensure the vaccination of many Americans, while simultaneously providing critical and timely acquisition support for life-saving therapeutics, tests, and treatments for COVID-19. We have demonstrated the ability to support and defend the Nation under the most trying of circumstances.

The Department will continue to promote and encourage COVID-19 vaccination for all Service members. The Department has made COVID-19 vaccination as easy and convenient as possible,

resulting in vaccines administered to over two million Service members and 96 percent of the Force—Active and Reserve—being fully vaccinated. Vaccination enhances operational readiness and protects the Force. All commanders have the responsibility and authority to preserve the Department’s compelling interests in mission accomplishment. This responsibility and authority includes the ability to maintain military readiness, unit cohesion, good order and discipline, and the health and safety of a resilient Joint Force.

On December 23, 2022 the James M. Inhofe National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA) for Fiscal Year (FY) 2023 was enacted. Section 525 of the NDAA for FY 2023 requires me to rescind the mandate that members of the Armed Forces be vaccinated against COVID-19, issued in my August 24, 2021 memorandum, “Mandatory Coronavirus Disease 2019 Vaccination of Department of Defense Service Members.” I hereby rescind that memorandum.

I also hereby rescind my November 30, 2021 memorandum, “Coronavirus Disease 2019 Vaccination for Members of the National Guard and the Ready Reserve.”

No individuals currently serving in the Armed Forces shall be separated solely on the basis of their refusal to receive the COVID-19 vaccination if they sought an accommodation on religious, administrative, or medical grounds. The Military Departments will update the records of such individuals to remove any adverse actions solely associated with denials of such requests, including letters of reprimand. The Secretaries of the Military Departments will further cease any ongoing reviews



of current Service member religious, administrative, or medical accommodation requests solely for exemption from the COVID-19 vaccine or appeals of denials of such requests.

Religious liberty is a foundational principle of enduring importance in America, enshrined in our Constitution and other sources of Federal law. Service members have the right to observe the tenets of their religion or to observe no religion at all, as provided in applicable Federal law and Departmental policy. Components shall continue to apply the uniform standards set forth in DoD Instruction 1300.17, "Religious Liberty in the Military Services."

Other standing Departmental policies, procedures, and processes regarding immunizations remain in effect. These include the ability of commanders to consider, as appropriate, the individual immunization status of personnel in making deployment, assignment, and other operational decisions, including when vaccination is required for travel to, or entry into, a foreign nation.

For Service members administratively discharged on the sole basis that the Service member failed to obey a lawful order to receive a vaccine for COVID-19, the Department is precluded by law from awarding any characterization less than a general (under honorable conditions) discharge. Former Service members may petition their Military Department's Discharge Review Boards and Boards for Correction of Military or Naval Records to individually request a correction to their personnel records, including records regarding the characterization of their discharge.

55a

The Under Secretary of Defense for Personnel and Readiness shall issue additional guidance to ensure uniform implementation of this memorandum, as appropriate.

The Department's COVID-19 vaccination efforts will leave a lasting legacy in the many lives we saved, the world-class Force we have been able to field, and the high level of readiness we have maintained, amidst difficult public health conditions. Our efforts were possible due, first and foremost, to the strength and dedication of our people. I remain profoundly [grateful] to the men and women of the Department of Defense for their efforts to protect our Force, the Department of Defense community, and to aid the American people.

/s/ [ILLEGIBLE]